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# Wonder

## STORY ANNUAL

AMERICA'S BEST  
SCIENCE FICTION  
ANTHOLOGY

1952 EDITION 25¢

FEATURING

### DEATH OF IRON

By S. S. HELD

LLOYD ARTHUR ESHBACH

JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.

And Many Others



A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION




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## STORY ANNUAL

VOL. 1, NO. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

1952 EDITION

### A FULL LENGTH NOVEL

#### **THE DEATH OF IRON . . . . . S. S. HELD**

The machines stop . . . now what stands between mankind and a return to primitive barbarism? Translated by Fletcher Pratt

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In the spaceways, mutiny can be the ultimate, final horror

Also See "Fan Fare for 1952," an editorial on Page 6

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# Fan Fare for 1952



**G**REATER love hath no man... than to write letters to an Annual publication. Way back in 1951, when the preceding issue of this anthol-

ogy appeared, featuring "Twice In Time" by Manly Wade Wellman, "The Alien Intelligence" by Jack Williamson and "The Chessboard Of Mars" by Eando Binder, a number of fans promptly betook themselves to the typewriter.

There is something impressive about this. To send off a letter, knowing it will be a year—if ever—before he gets any action on it, takes a dogged sort of loyalty encountered only in science-fiction fans.

Writes Mr. R. R. Anger, of Ottawa, Canada:

"When the first issue came out, everyone wondered if this annual would fold after one issue as had all the others published before. But with the '51 issue it seems certain that WONDER STORY ANNUAL will become a landmark, a yearly anthology on a par with those costing ten times as much. Your backlog of available material is one of the richest available to any editor and you are using it well."

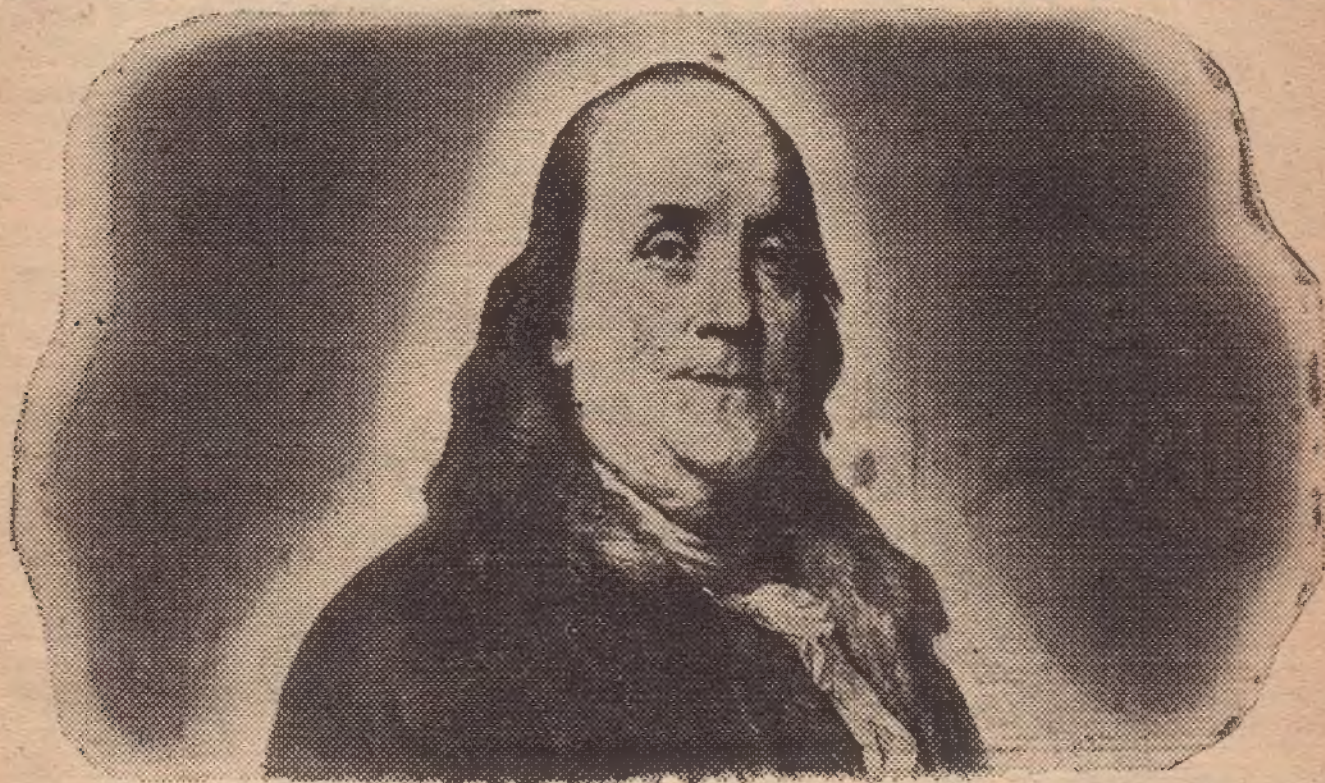
A lot of hewing of the backlog went into this year's choices. The stories collected here are those we thought had something extra—a touch of quality which made them more significant than most. Read them and see. And if, as a result, you feel the urge to write us a letter, let yourself go.

We'll be right here again next year.

—The Editor



# WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



**Benjamin Franklin**  
(A Rosicrucian)

**W**HY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

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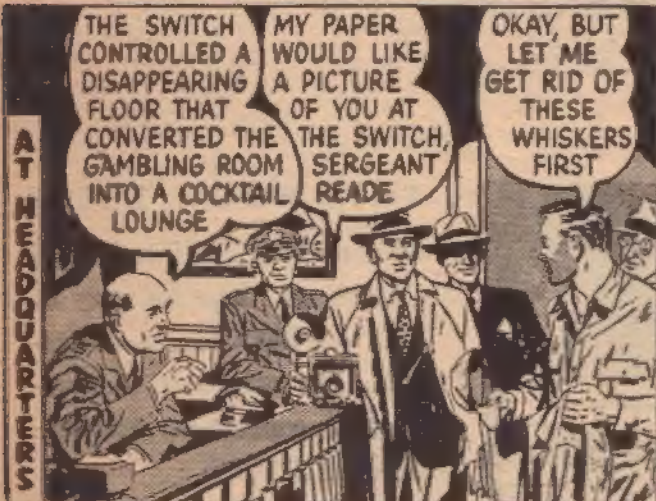
# AND THEN THE GAMBLERS MET THEIR MATCH...



JIM READE, MASQUERADING AS A ROUGH-LOOKING SUPPLIER OF ILLEGAL GAME TO A SWANKY SUPPER CLUB, GETS THE BREAK HE HAS BEEN WAITING FOR...



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# GUARANTEED

*A Short Short Story Complete on This Page*

By E. EVERETT EVANS



JEAN COXART was something of a telepathist. Not a professional, but an exceptionally gifted amateur. So he knew that he had been receiving a telepathic call these past five days. But he was vaguely worried about it, and had not yet attempted an answer. He could not decipher just what was being said, although there was something slightly familiar about the word-ideas.

Finally, after several days, he caught on. It was not, as he had guessed at first, a foreign language. Rather, it was a very distorted form of English. There was a slurring—a clipped elision to the word and sentence structure, that had delayed his understanding. Now he had been forced to the belief that the person sending was from the Future.

Then came the day when he felt confident enough of his own ability to reply to the constant attempts to contact him. Instantly he was conscious of a renewed effort from his unknown communicator.

"What year are you living in?" the voiceless voice inquired anxiously.

"This is Nineteen Forty-eight. What year are you in?" Coxart replied.

"I am about one million years in the future. I am so very pleased that I have at last been able to contact someone from your generation. I have been trying to do so for years."

"What is it like in your day? It seems so incredibly distant from ours that it must be altogether different."

"Oh, I suppose it is. We have all the

leisure we want, because everything is done for us by automatic machinery, and by robots. We spend our days with our studies, our hobbies, or in pure pleasures."

"That is indeed different. We have to work about forty hours a week in order to earn our living."

THE Voice of the Future seemed to chuckle, then continued: "I have read of that. But it is because of our conditions here that I have tried to get in touch with someone from your age. There is a very important task which I wish you to do for me. Are you willing to attempt it?"

"That would depend upon the nature of the task, of course. If it is something that I can do, and that does not interfere with my ethical concepts, I will be very pleased to do anything I can for one of our descendants from the future. Just what is it you wish done?"

"I want you to bring a legal suit against a certain famous mercantile or manufacturing corporation of your day. I have in my possession one of their products. It has been an heirloom in our family ever since your time. There was a guarantee with the article, which has proven itself to be incorrect, and thus they are criminally negligent."

"Well, one million years is quite a length of time for anything to last, as you must admit, my friend."

"I grant you that. But their guarantee was made to cover all time, nor was there any limit to the length of time."

"Oh, I begin to guess what you mean. Your heirloom, then, is—"

"That is correct. My Foreversharp Pen, which was guaranteed 'not for years, not for life, but guaranteed forever.' It no longer works—I can't get it fixed here—and I wanna sue!"

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# The DEATH



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# of IRON

A Novel by S. S. HELD

## I

### *The Girl*

**R**AYMOND LECLAIR, contemplating the incredible results of his tests, decided that the blame must be placed not on science but on fallible human nature. He checked over the operations once more, searching for the source of the error which must somehow have crept into his formulas, but it continued to elude him.

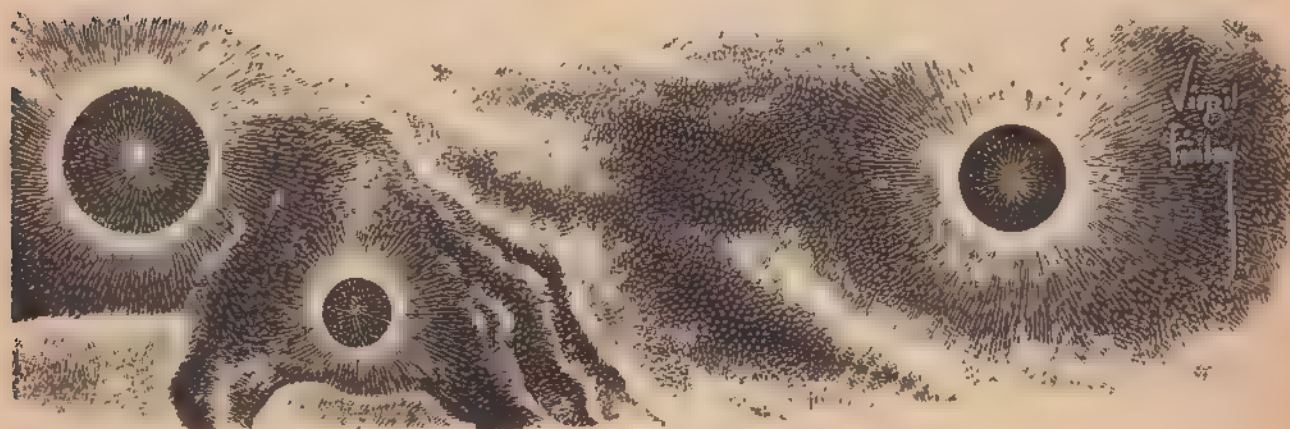
In reality he was very little disturbed, but there are certain phenomena which impinge on the rou-

tine of every scientist, which require a special terminology to account for them. This was one of these cases; Leclair searched his memory for the proper words as he gathered his working papers together, left the foundry, mounted a stone stairway and pushed open the door of the material-testing laboratory.

It was a large room with white walls and a tiled floor, littered with various machines and pieces of apparatus. It was already nearly noon,

Translated from the French by FLETCHER PRATT

*The machines stop . . . now what stands between  
mankind and a return to primitive barbarism?*



originally published in September, 1932, *Wonder Stories*



but the dull October sky shed only a feeble light through the windows and surfaces of steel and brass reflecting the glare of the electric lights.

In one corner of the room a tall, thin young man with a long, horsey face was bent attentively over a testing stand watching some machine through thick glasses. Leclair, extending toward him the graph which was the result of his investigations, began a laborious explanation . . . Pierre Selevine, always rude when at work, pushed away the extended paper without replying.

With eyes fixed on the needle that was registering his results he attached a weight whose pressure, multiplied through a system of levers, was crushing some mass of heated material. His fingers moved with precision over the polished shafts, regulating the application of the heat or the speed of rotation of the moving parts. Understanding that it was useless to interrupt at present, Leclair stepped aside.

The melancholy light threw a sad and aged expression onto the faces of the pair.

Through the windows the ruddy orb of a sun, deprived of all strength by shrouding veils of mist and smoke, was barely visible. Under its gloomy inspection an industrial city was engaged in its daily tasks. From the window through which Leclair was surveying the scene, he could catch a confused view of the habitations of the workmen, a fragment of the river and of the factories of the city of Denain, arranged in neat cubistic patterns of building and chimney.

The Escaut River glided past docks encumbered with the merchandise of the world and beneath a tracery of bridges and cranes. Imprisoned by dams, stained with oil and coal-dust the water seemed to be made of solid metal. Only for an instant would its surface be troubled

by the passage of some tug dragging its long train of laden barges, rolling the water away from their prows in sparkling ripples. In the distance the horizon was hidden by an agglomeration of buildings dominated by blast furnaces.

Sensitive as he was to delicate forms and colors Leclair detested this corner of the earth which had been rendered so ugly by the industry of man. A confused rumbling went up from it night and day, a rumbling that was produced by mighty machines in factories where thousands labored, of thundering hoofs and groaning wheels and bridges that vibrated under the weight of passing trains.

Muscular workmen toiled in the mines and at the banks of the river. Others hammered the softened metal in the light of its own fires; lineal descendants of the men of an earlier age who poured the molten bronze from crucibles of stone, they continued man's conquest of inanimate nature, forging the tools which gave to one feeble animal his dominion over all the rest. After this victory over all the beasts of earth, man still fought here, forcing rebellious metal to his service at the price of toil and torment.

LECLAIR was absorbed in the contemplation of the scene when someone called his name softly. Turning, he saw Fanny, the girl who polished the gauges of the testing laboratory. Seated behind a grinding machine, she beckoned to him. She was from Waes, a daughter of the laboring classes, somewhat frail and with a certain grace. She admired this young man, so elegant in his sober and well-tailored clothes, so different from the gross workmen among whom her lot was cast.

Leclair stepped over to her, and to pass the time, asked for news of Laval, her lover, a mechanic from Paris, who beat her and was in the



habit of exploiting her.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, Julien!" she said, "I'm off him for good."

Leaning toward the engineer, she regarded him laguidly through half-closed lashes. Her lips seemed to offer themselves . . . With a start she recoiled; the door had opened suddenly behind her and in came Pillot, the electrician, dirty from head to foot, late and in a hurry, as was usual with him. He covered the

cabalistic documents as an ordinary man might a newspaper. They told a tale of overworked metal, of the labor of interior forces, and finally of the crystallization and dry fracture of the material at a point where it should have been sound. His face exhibited an increasing astonishment.

"What in the world have you done?" he demanded, "I don't understand."

"Nor I," replied Leclair. "Your

## *Death of a Bootstrap*

SCIENCE-FICTION is, in a small way, akin to scientific method: it often predicts certain results as a logical extension of known phenomena. The difference lies in that the scientist, having predicted his results, goes on to achieve them experimentally; or, failing that, modifies his predictions and starts all over again. While science-fiction, having predicted—or "extrapolated," as any stf addict will insist the process be called—simply sits back and lets our wonderful, terrible; ever-changing human situation prove it right or wrong.

Science-fiction writers are a forward-looking bunch, and their predictions are usually founded on a proposed scientific *addition* to the present set-up . . . a new gadget, a new technique, the final realization of space flight with all its attendant problems of colonization, interplanetary politics, interstellar warfare. It is the "bootstrap" process: we invent X, and shortly thereafter our society finds itself based in part on X. But such is not the case with DEATH OF IRON.

It is based upon the subtraction of X. . . .

Which, in this case, is iron. Fix your mind, please, on the degree to which our civilization is based on iron . . . from can-openers to sky-scrapers, needles to ocean-liners, from steam-shovels to printing-presses to guns to zippers. . . .

Now read the story.

—The Editor

ten kilometers that separated his home from the factory of Morain and Co., by bicycle and lived in a perpetual horror of rain. After the usual lamentations about the state of the roads, he went grumbly about his tasks.

Selevine, having finished what he was doing, drew a short pipe from his pocket, filled and lit it, and without a word, came over to shake Leclair's hand. Then, noticing for the first time the graphs in which Leclair had expressed the results of his tests on the high-speed steels, he seized them eagerly, reading these

formula must be defective."

"You're joking! Why, only a few days ago we got the most wonderful results. There must be an error in calculations."

"But I assure you . . ." protested Leclair.

"Oh, well, never mind. It isn't important. We'll take another sample, that's all. Anybody can make a mistake. I just finished my experiment with a mixup as bad as yours. You know I've been studying natural steel alloys for some time. Their properties are not very well known. Some of them have an enor-



mous amount of tensile strength but they are unstable and nervous; under a shock they break like glass. Very little use in industry, of course, but they offer an interesting field of research. I had succeeded in producing a ductile high-carbon steel, but after a little time its cohesion seems to have been spontaneously destroyed. Queer, isn't it?"

"But how do you explain it?"

"I have been trying to interpret the phenomenon by calculation. It's a tough job. Yesterday, I was at it late, working over this formula, burying myself neck-deep in mathematical analysis. For a moment I thought I had discovered something. I stopped working and went over to the window to get a breath of fresh air. My room looks out over the Essel Forge shop. As I stood there I could see the men hammering the metal amid the flames, and for some reason the spectacle filled me with a kind of exultation. It seemed to me that I was just at the edge of translating into comprehensibility one of the most profound secrets of the material universe; that I was about to express all the transformations of iron in a single formula..."

He stopped as though a little ashamed of his enthusiasm, his eyes roaming about the room.

"Where was I? Oh, yes—I turned back to the table. When I had worked out the results of all the formulas, simplified their products, I found I had for a solution—a mathematical expression that could not be expressed by any material result and which was inherently absurd. I could have wept with rage. Every time I try to solve certain problems of metallurgy I run into the impossible . . . Do you know, there are crystalline equilibriums in metal that are quite unpredictable, very much like the reactions of living matter."

An old workman, clad in the blue jumper of a mechanic, shuffled into the laboratory and approaching

Selevine, informed him that a new lot of metal was ready to be examined.

The two engineers went toward the foundry, which was located beyond the workshops. Passing along a gallery which ran around the building at a height of twenty feet above the generators below, they stepped suddenly into a deafening chorus of sounds. Beneath their feet in the blue artificial day of the arc-lights, electric motors whirled in their carapaces of steel. Dynamos added their heavy monotonous note to the din, and traveling cranes rumbled about them.

**I**T WAS a harmony of swift, precise movement, of the extension and retraction of driving rods in feline gestures, of the calculated mad interlocking of gears, of rapidly-moving cams and pinions. The machines toiled with the metal all around; a mighty knife sliced it into sections, a hundred lathes peeled the sections like so many fruits; the files bit it with their fine hard teeth; the grinding wheels shaped it amid a display of burning sparks, silvery-shining drills bored to its heart, saws tore at it. Modified in form and substance the steel cried out with a thousand voices—some raucous, some sonorous, shrill squeals and shrieks of agony. Then, outstanding all the rest, came the heavy beat of a trip-hammer on a plate.

They encountered the superintendent of the factory.

"Well, how about my test figures?" he asked.

Leclair hesitated, and then promised: "You'll get them by the end of the week, Monsieur Lefevre."

As they reached the foundry a puddler came to assure them that the steel was ready.

The converters, of the old type, with crucibles, were subterranean, and were heated by gas-jets, the flow of which was regulated from above the ground. Lids of refractory



earths half-closed the vents from whose mouths there now escaped puffs of suffocating heat.

Right before one of these openings a foundryman, clothed in his tabard of leather and wet gloves, plunged in a long-handled pair of tongs and drew forth a crucible of the metal, whose burning white changed to a rose color as it struck the outer air. With another tool he skillfully skimmed the floating scum from the pot, and turning out a glob of rapidly hardening metal, dropped it beneath a hammer which struck it flat in a shower of sparks. The glowing blade of metal, tempered in icy water, was seized by the jaws of two gigantic pincers and broken in half. Selevine, examining the grain of the fracture, declared the fusion of the metal satisfactory.

Through drawn lashes he contemplated the white hot steel, making several observations about the heat-treatment of the other batches in the converters. He went to and fro in the narrow place without seeming in the least affected by the heat, experiencing a singular pleasure in breathing the superheated air, halting here and there to examine samples of the batches under treatment. His companion, who had gone outside, heard the noon bell ring without seeing him reappear, and without waiting any longer left the factory with the last groups of workmen.

There was a special canteen for the engineers at the side of the shop, but Leclair preferred to take his lunch outside the premises in a little restaurant where Selevine and Pillot frequently joined him. Today he was alone in the stall reserved for guests of importance.

A waitress brought him a plate-lunch of plentiful size, which Leclair finished with rapidity.

Sniffing the odor of his lukewarm coffee mingled with that of his cigarette, he abandoned himself to vague reveries. The incidents of the morn-



Pierre Selevine



ing passed in review before his mind, and he considered unhappily the prospect of having to repeat his task.

Once more he regretted having left Morocco and wondered if he had not interpreted the promises of Morain, his employer, in a manner too favorable to himself. But the chance had been too good to be missed. At thirty an engineer should be on the road to success; and the head of the steel company had certainly been generous.

Aside from practical considerations there was the presence of Mme. Morain at Denain to keep him there. He recalled the grey eyes and delicate profile of Renée Morain and all his evil humor disappeared.

One o'clock. Near him the steel-workers in blouses and overalls, their heavy muscles rippling under dirty skins, were consuming their lunches, washing them down with draughts of cider or wine.

Leclair went out. A single ray of sunlight, striking athwart two clouds, gilded the side of the street which, always deserted at meal-times, was now beginning to fill up again. A group of workmen emerged from a wineshop, saluting the engineer awkwardly. At the corner ahead he saw Pillot get out of a car, and made a detour to avoid being bored by his conversation. It took him down a street where a group of working girls went, clothed in gray—bare-headed, youth in them triumphing over the effects of labor. One of them, in whom he recognized Fanny, turned toward him with a clear peal of laughter.

The young man turned away, annoyed. He could not understand how he had come to be caught in a provoking flirtation with her, and recalled with a certain repugnance how they had stood in the angle of the passage that led to his part of the factory. As she leaned to him he had felt the lithe young body under the sordid grey clothes and

had kissed her full on the lips. It was dark there; neither of them had seen the approach of Selevine, who stood regarding them with a smile. Leclair, irritated, had questioned the Russian.

"Well, what do you want to butt in for?"

Selevine had shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps you didn't know that girl has a lover?"

"And what of it?"

Since that revelation Leclair had avoided the company of the young working-girl. Seeing her there in the street, laughing and gay, he wondered how much truth Selevine's innuendo had contained. A mere lie, perhaps.

## II

### *First Trouble*

FOR eight months, Leclair had been working under Selevine's orders at the factory of Morain and Co.

His principal duty was that of testing the high-speed steels which were the specialty of the firm. He performed this task well, but without enthusiasm and with a regularity that had become a trifle mechanical.

His chief, on the other hand, took a passionate and irregular interest in his work. He was in bad health and was subject to violent fits of depression; but he was interested in what he did and for days would let it keep him even from eating and speaking. Then all at once, his humor would change without any reasonable cause.

Selevine was also interested in mathematical physics, and took a certain mystical pleasure in the material with which he labored. Taking Leclair into the foundry he



would show him by what substances incorporated in the fluid masses and by what methods of heat-treatment the different types of steel were produced.

There, amid the mystery of ingenuous combinations, the radiant body of the metal was altered. The Fire-god reigned.

Fire took all the diverse forms of which it is capable; appeared in tongues of purple, in ruby-colored vapors, in gems, in wild dream-flowers.

It expanded throughout the irons as they fused, pierced the heart of every blast-furnace and slept in the cold blocks of steel, ready to waken under a shock.

At the gesture of the foundryman, naked beneath his leather tabard, a retort would turn over. A jet of violently-driven air, suddenly released into the mass, sent long golden flames tipped with purple rushing from the mouth of the vessel amid a terrible roaring; vaporized jets of lava, sulphur-yellow, emerald-green and striped with violent vapors, dashed forth to break in showers of twinkling stars.

The steel was refined in electric furnaces girdled with brass. Tremendous accumulations of energy were gathered in these pockets of silica and refractory brick. Then, with the current, shut off, the electrodes were lifted out by systems of automatic counterweights and the steel poured out in little brooks whose whiteness struck the eye with blinding brilliance.

Samples were taken from the cooled ingots. The microscope revealed their crystalline structure. Under the object-glass of that instrument could be distinguished the curious designs of the material-mosaics and carpet-patterns with interweaving lines. The hard, fracture steels gave a delicate pale blue field starred with tiny white grains; the mild steels had delicate waterings with shell-like patterns like those in

silk or mother-of-pearl; others were graven with tiny hieroglyphics. Only Selevine could read correctly these inscriptions that told the story of the inner life of matter.

To the information he thus obtained was joined that which resulted from the various mechanical tests. Machines as precise as watch-movements subjected the samples to slow traction, tension or torsion. The fact that they moved in well-oiled silence did not exclude their possession of indomitable force.

The engineer, bending his thin, bony face over the machines, would follow the movement of a needle on a scale or of a stylograph across a drum. Levers as sensitive as the antennae of an insect seemed no more than the prolongations of his delicate fingers, as with the slightest of touches he applied the force that rent the material apart.

In those machines chains were pulled to deformity and breakage; steel cables gave way, their sections vibrating one by one, as the torn ends leaped into the air like the heads of snakes.

Another machine determined the hardness of steels by the depressions left in their surface by a ball driven into it by titanic pressure; another filed the surface with a curious duplication of human gestures in the process.

Shining with reflections under the cold electric lights, the instruments appeared as torturing implements of some nightmare. Inquisition, at the same time suggesting the stiff movements of giant insects, which, with articulated limbs and heavy carapaces, tore to pieces in their mandibles the living body of the metal.

IT WAS while testing samples of high-speed steel that Leclair thought he found the machines less supple and sensitive than before. One might almost have said that some heavy and ignorant hand had fumbled with them until they be-



came tired from abnormal efforts; and yet the effect was so tenuous as to be beyond the range of observation. The engineer had only a vague impression of something that he was unable to pin down.

Several days later, as he was passing through the lathe department he heard voices raised in argument. Choleur, the foreman, who exercised a violent and somewhat capricious authority over his subordinates, was shouting that someone had, for a second time, broken an important part of a big automatic lathe. The workman in charge of the implement was defending himself vigorously, and calling on his fellows to bear witness that he had regulated the instrument correctly. He complained that it must have contained some hidden defect which had brought about the fracture.

In spite of his protests the mechanic was dismissed. But the man who replaced him was no more lucky; a few days later the main rod of a turret-lathe bent suddenly. Engaging in the mass of rotating metal the jaws tore loose the tools and their attachments, injuring the man who was guiding the machine. The same day the sliding parts of a big plane suddenly collapsed.

Choleur filled the air with his curses.

Suspicious and with side-glances at the men about him, he examined the sections that had failed. The idea that this series of accidents was not the result of chance had occurred to him. Lefevre had the same thought but neither of them could find the slightest basis for such a conclusion. They reluctantly accepted the misfortunes as purely fortuitous, when four days later, the main power-transmission shaft of the shop suddenly gave way, tearing down some of the steel trussing of the roof in its fall.

Microscopic examination of the breakages revealed to Selevine a steel that had been submitted to

extraordinary stresses fatigued by over-exertion.

"It must be that big hammer," he told Leclair when they were in the laboratory together, "the one they installed near the lathe-room recently. The continual shocks set up a vibration in machines already submitted to considerable strain, and in the long run bring about a modification in the structure of the metal which breaks down its resistance. At least, that's the only explanation that occurs to me."

The electric light died out as he spoke, then flashed once, and went out for good.

LECLAIR telephoned to Laval for the breakdown gang. The wire carried a series of not very pleasant remarks to his ears in reply. Annoyed by the imperative tone of the engineer, the mechanic was objecting vigorously.

"I don't know what's the matter with everyone around here lately," declared Leclair in an irritated tone. "If I were the boss . . . That man Laval is becoming impossible. He counts on his stand-in with you, and I can't ask him to do a single thing without getting some kind of an insolent answer. With Martin, I ran into the same hostility, only he hides it under a good-natured air that doesn't mean a thing. The old fool exaggerates his deafness so as to interpret orders in a manner to suit himself.

"In order to avoid labor he deploys all the resources of his intelligence; once the danger of having to work is over he has to take a long rest to recover from the shock of being asked to do something. He sleeps on the job with a skinful of wine, too. Decidedly, these workmen have no ideal but getting drunk."

"At least that's a concrete idea," replied Selevine, tranquilly, "and about the only concrete idea that anyone has these days."

"Your point of view is all wrong,



old man. Believe me, it's necessary to be firm with people like that. The least indulgence they interpret as a sign of weakness. You have to be severe with them to get any respect. My predecessor at Said Machou was a humanitarian of your type. He had what are called "advanced ideas" and tried to apply some of them in the department he directed. The result was even beyond his hopes. Three months after he came on the job it was impossible to get any kind of effective work out of the laborers. Their demands grew in proportion to what they got. The more inoffensive ones merely kept happily 'stewed' all day long. The workshops were full of public women and public brawls. At the least excuse the Italians hauled out their knives and threatened to start cutting throats. Most of the time they did their threatening from a distance, though—out of delicacy of sentiment, I suppose. Every time they tried to clamp discipline on again there was a strike and a miniature riot."

"And then you appeared on the scene?"

"I did. I chased the foreigners and horsewhipped a few of the natives—under due form of colonial justice, of course. But it was too late. They never really reestablished order."

Leclair's glance fell on the big microscope of which Selevine was adjusting the screw. The half-shaded lamp lit the pale profile of the observer, outlining his sharp nose and finely-graven lips, and emphasizing the bitterness around the corners of the mouth and the heavy-lidded eyes, red with sleeplessness.

"You're tiring yourself, old man."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

A vague pattern was audible in the adjacent corridor. Leclair glanced at the clock on the wall and as he did so, someone in a white laboratory coat entered.

"Well, gang, it's 'the hour'!"

It was thus that Pillot designated the hour par excellence, the hour of

quitting work. At the same moment came the piercing sound of the factory whistle.

After a rapid toilet, the young men mingled with the crowd of laborers which the factories were disgorging into the mean streets of the industrial city.

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### III

#### *The Soul of Metal*

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LEAVING the factory, Leclair went home, slipped into his evening clothes and directed his steps toward the Morain home.

His way lay through the hamlet of Trechy, almost entirely devoted to workmen's homes; little narrow streets whose squat houses and smoke-grimed walls looked incredibly ugly in the trembling light of the old-fashioned street-lamps. A little further on, the buildings began to space out; he found himself in a district where a frantic, hurried existence was carried on behind glass and steel. Bridges swung their long legs across the waters of a canal. United by long lines of wire, electric moons threw their somewhat sinister light across the ocean. Coal dumps, rails, locomotives, piles of ore or scrap iron rose out of the darkness here and there.

A quarry opened beside his path. Mercury-vapor lamps threw heavy shadows around laden men and overworked horses in the ravined declivities. A wheel turned at the shaft mechanism of a mine; a big machine moved somewhere with a rhythmic beat.

Passing the Naval foundry he saw the red light streaking across the sky, while every one of a thousand windows reflected it back. Lit by the blazing furnaces below, the pillars of smoke took on a kind of magic splendor.



But Leclair was indifferent to the splendor of the spectacle. He walked along in a kind of waking dream, his mind at random over the events of the day, his memories of the Rail Marocains, the thought of what his share in the commission on that sale would amount to, and the wife of his superior.

With a certain simplicity, he argued out the affair: "She made a marriage of convenience. In a big city, she would already have taken a lover, but here the opportunity is lacking. Certainly she ought to be bored with life." He did not carry this line of reasoning through to its logical conclusion, for, without in the least counting on her yielding to him, he was imagining a tender, almost Platonic love-affair, which would become more only by one of those accidents that chance places in the way of lovers.

This hesitation in his imaginings was his sacrifice to decency; in a town of such limited social life an affair of this sort would become known at once. Morain was an attentive and jealous husband. If he harbored as much as one single suspicion, Leclair's own future would be hopelessly compromised. That cold, strong man, so firm and broad of shoulder, would be difficult to deceive. It was hard to imagine him being affectionate, but Leclair who knew the household, had no doubts on that score.

His imagination pictured the foundry-master bending his flowing grey moustache over Renée's graceful neck, caressing her with his hands, his ruddy visage congested with desire, and the picture caused him a pang. Leclair, in his own imagination, was always the voluptuary who desires no more of love than its physical concomitants. But in the past the search had brought him more pain than delight, and his most glorious hours had been poisoned with a subtle venom.

He had arrived at Ronceraies.

It was a beautiful place, situated about a league from the steel-mills and outside the agglomeration of workmen's homes.

Morain had acquired it from his predecessor, Deram, after having accomplished the ruin of the latter—by perfectly legal methods, of course. A little park, running right down to the river-bank, surrounded the house. Out here the comparative rarity of the omnipresent factories and the fact that the other buildings were more widely spaced out, permitted one a view of a more distant horizon, but one which ended at last in the blue smoke of the mills of Louches. Through the calm water of the Escaut plowed the tugs with their trains of loaded barges, or other barges drawn by tractors which moved along the bank.

In all this desert of steel and stone the little park with its shadowy vaults underneath the trees was one of the sweetest oases. Leclair, who had a slight headache—his ears still beat with the sound of the hammer and his eyes were spotted by the too-brilliant glare of the heated metal—took a little walk before going up to the house, breathing with pleasure the moist air from which the river had washed the weight of dust and smoke.

**I**N THE smoking-room he found Selevine and Morain. A little later M. Fontaine came in. This scientist, thanks to the generosity of Morain, had been able to prepare a work on the microscopic structure of meteorites which he hoped would unlock the door of the Institute for him. A solid friendship united him to the foundry-master.

A passionate lover of astronomy, Fontaine was particularly interested in the meteors whose fugitive brilliance animates our nights. He achieved a fine detachment from all that concerns this troubled globe of ours as he contemplated those sudden streaks of light in the black

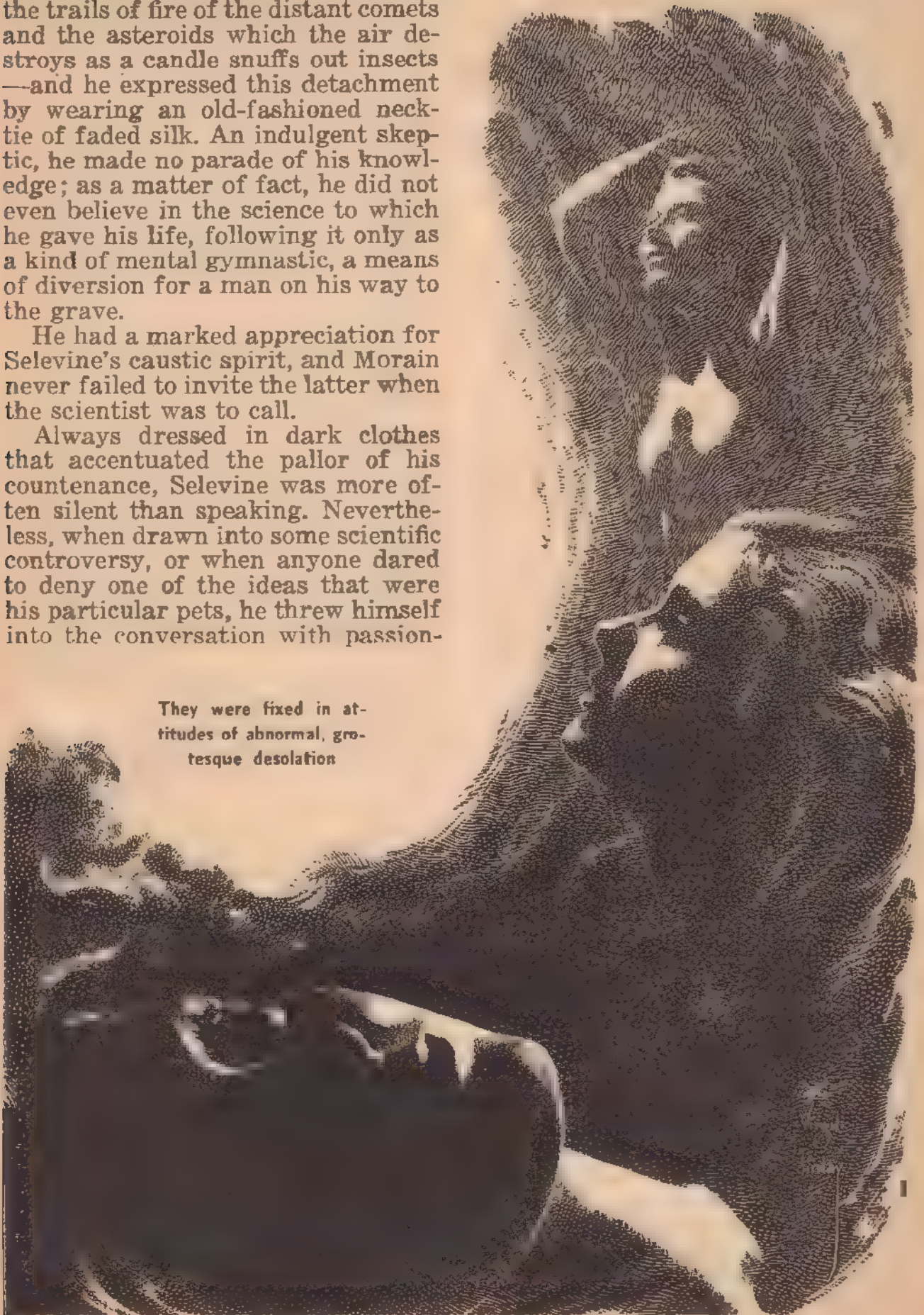


silence of the night-sky, or followed the trails of fire of the distant comets and the asteroids which the air destroys as a candle snuffs out insects—and he expressed this detachment by wearing an old-fashioned neck-tie of faded silk. An indulgent skeptic, he made no parade of his knowledge; as a matter of fact, he did not even believe in the science to which he gave his life, following it only as a kind of mental gymnastic, a means of diversion for a man on his way to the grave.

He had a marked appreciation for Selevine's caustic spirit, and Morain never failed to invite the latter when the scientist was to call.

Always dressed in dark clothes that accentuated the pallor of his countenance, Selevine was more often silent than speaking. Nevertheless, when drawn into some scientific controversy, or when anyone dared to deny one of the ideas that were his particular pets, he threw himself into the conversation with passion-

They were fixed in attitudes of abnormal, grotesque desolation





ate ardor. His knowledge was immense, though badly ordered, and his imagination, though somewhat disciplined by the methodical German training he had received, often drew him out of the straight road of science into weird forests of fantasy. Morain, who at bottom thought him a barbarian, nevertheless appreciated his practical achievements at their full value.

In physics and above all, on their mathematical side, he had carried his studies far. A follower of Lubat-chewsky and Riemann, familiar with the work of the non-Euclidean geometrists, he frequently carried his hearers with him out of range of human perception and into the disconcerting regions of the fourth dimension; where the astronomer, in spite of his interest in things new and strange, always refused to follow. On such occasions a smile would play around Selevine's mouth. Then becoming severely practical, he would discuss social questions, denouncing the iniquity of the rich and the misery forced upon the workers by capitalistic society. He held with Tolstoi, that modern civilization was responsible for all the evils that weigh upon humanity.

Tonight he had engaged M. Fontaine in a discussion that both of them found extremely interesting; for Dr. Levysson and Breval had arrived and it was necessary to twice send the butler to remind the disputants that dinner was served.

The mistress of the house came down and all went to the table.

Little lamps with silk shades shed their soft light over the linen. The golden rays touched the hair of the young matron and caressed the pure and refined lines of her bare arms.

She did the honors of the table and listened, with a far-away smile, to the compliments of her neighbors, the doctor, who rather fancied himself as a connoisseur of wine and women, and Breval, a well known painter, just back from a trip to the

United States.

The conversation at the beginning of the dinner touched on this subject and that but the inevitable shop-talk came up at last.

MEANWHILE Leclair was watching, with some annoyance, as Dr. Levysson deployed all the graces of an old beau, bending toward his charming hostess a face already flushed with the first libations. A clang of silver woke the engineer from his reverie. He heard M. Fontaine saying:

"My dear Selevine, the explanation you give for the peculiarities in your steels seems to me extremely specious."

"Do you know, Levysson," said Morain, "you have a singular neighbor. I presented Selevine to you as an engineer and the head of my laboratories, but he is less an engineer than a philosopher, and less a philosopher than a Nihilist. He has curious views on the subject of matter and some of his notions, though they are based on a solid mathematical foundation, hark back to the alchemists of the middle ages. He attributes to metals a kind of life—slower than our own, but possessing a dumb sense of feeling and a kind of conscience. In fact he thinks he sees in metal all the manifestations that characterize organized beings, but in a rudimentary state. What do you think about that?"

The doctor wiped his lips and replied with an air of profundity:

"Yes. A good many physicians reason along these lines these days. They have been struck by certain phenomena common in metallic matter and the living cell. I think the analogy is far-fetched; after all it is no more than a play on words."

"A play on words!" exclaimed Morain. "Don't you think that the crystal is the specific form of matter, the mineral germ, so to speak, which is born, reproduces itself, and finally dies?"



The doctor shook his head. M. Fontaine, the thorough-going materialist, added another argument.

"Boses has demonstrated that certain properties which were formerly believed the exclusive characteristics of living matter are also possessed by metals. Take the fatigue of steel, for instance, and the result of the application of certain depressants, drugs and poisons. Belaieff, a compatriot of Selevine's, was the first to speak of the inherited characteristics of metals."

"You are right," agreed the Russian. "The mechanical performance of a metal depends upon its history and the states it has already passed through. You can see it in the case of certain carbon-steels, made of scrap which has been melted down, and which have already left behind them five to ten generations of 'metallic entity'. Chemically identical to the same steels made with fresh metals, they are more capricious in performance; they undergo spontaneous evolutions. The explanation I offer of the breakage of those machines is not at all incredible in this light."

"It's possible," approved the foundry-master, "but I fear that these conversations on mechanics are boring M. Breval."

The painter protested. "These questions have a good deal of technical interest."

"And considerable practical importance," replied Morain. "Nothing that concerns iron should really leave us indifferent. Isn't it the primordial element, and in a sense armament of modern civilization? No one really considers how much industry can modify the habits, the life and the development of a race. It is necessary for centuries to pass before the difference is really appreciated. In a few hundred years we will know, for the first time, how much steel, for example, has influenced human evolution, and they will speak of our age as the age of

steel as we refer to the Stone Age or the Bronze Age."

"I hope," put in Levysson, "that our distant grand-nephews won't judge us solely by the uses we make of a single metal, no matter how essential it is. You see too many things from the metallurgists's point of view, my dear Morain. What the devil! There are more important things in the world. The intelligence of man—"

"The intelligence of man," interrupted M. Fontaine "is specifically a manufacturing intelligence. It has no occupation but the creation of artificial organs which complete and supply the deficiencies of the human machine which is the means of support for the intelligence and which furnishes it with its means of action. The whole superiority of man over the animal, all the effort of the human mind, past and present, is comprehended in this—to invent and construct tools and machines. It is only by means of matter that the superior forms of life can conduct the battle with matter and this conflict will go on forever."

THERE was a moment of silence; the clink of silver was audible; the flowers on the table seemed to exhale a heavier perfume and the thoughts of those present to become more active.

Selevine, who seemed to be regarding the glass in which the bubbles coursed through his golden wine, with the most intense attention, lifted his head.

"Why is it necessary to believe that the human mind will always need instruments and intermediaries to manifest itself?" he asked. "Who knows what the future holds for us? Whether in place of multiplying the mechanisms interposed between our bodies and the world we will not simplify and do away with them? There are in man certain mental energies which he has failed to use to the best advantage only because of infirmi-



ties in his own nature; or rather, because he has always had some useful and docile instrument at hand, he has continued to do the easiest thing—that is, something industrial."

"But what else could he do?" demanded Breval in astonishment.

"I mean to say that if evolution had taken a different course, human activity would take place in the psychic domain instead of the kingdom of matter."

"I am curious to know what would have been the result of such a state of affairs."

Selevine smiled.

"To make that out we would need a different type of mind; our mentalities, once they get beyond the concrete, flop about like fish out of water."

"Dreams, dreams," said M. Fontaine, wiping his glasses. "The future belongs to the machine. The absolute monarchy of metal is at hand. Even art must bow to it or perish."

The dinner had reached its end.

Before his luxuriously appointed table Morain began to tell of his difficult early days with obvious pleasure, but Levysson, though pressed to stay with him for a cigar, made for the smoking room.

In a corner of the salon Leclair was telling Mme. Morain of episodes of his Moroccan experience. Two years before he had been engaged in the construction of a hydraulic plant on the Oum-er-Rabis, where they had placed him in charge of the native labor gangs. He had not liked it at the time, but from a distance the memory was pleasant.

"I remember," he said, "an Arab cafe with painted rooms and a court paved with white stone. The daughter of the proprietor poured us iced liqueurs and burning-hot coffee. Her fingers were painted carmine, she was covered with cheap jewelry and her arms were bare. She received all the compliments addressed to her by lowering remarkably thick eyelash-

es over very black eyes. We all fell in love with her, but she was hunting for big game and our modest engineers' incomes were not sufficient to offer any temptation."

"I understand how you can be homesick. We can't offer you any such unusual diversions here."

Leclair became more cheerful.

"The Orient has a definite flavor, which it is difficult to forget. That's a trite remark, but a true one. At the beginning of my stay here, I was tormented with regrets, saddened by the ugliness of things, then I became reconciled to Denain. Your presence had a good deal to do with this change of attitude. No, don't smile, it's no more than the truth. You can't know how much your friendship represents to an orphan and wanderer like myself."

"Then come to see us oftener. Your father was my husband's best friend; is it necessary to remind you that you are a friend of the family? The work in the factory interests you?"

"Certainly."

"You're on good terms with Selevine now?"

"Oh, he's becoming humanized. At first he seems a difficult man to figure out, but in time one finds agreeable spots in him. He is subject to savage fits which he tries to conceal under an air of timidity. He is an inspired engineer who writes poetry in figures without knowing that he does it. A rare specimen."

"His work has certainly not hurt the factory."

"But am I mistaken in thinking he rather likes you?"

Mme. Morain burst into laughter:

"Oh, what an idea!"

She was still laughing when her husband came back from the billiard-room with Levysson. The doctor, who had won the game, poured into a glass a generous supply of liqueur, a species of medicine with which he was accustomed to aid the functions of an already excellent



digestion. Then all four rejoined Selevine and M. Fontaine. The latter was saying:

"No, no, old man, I don't believe that. You will never escape from the laws of life which demand the bad as well as the good, pain as well as joy and the triumph of the strong over the weak.

"Society, taken as a mass, is a vast plastic organism whose structure depends, like that of any living body, on the interplay of its own elements and the exterior forces. It is a human grouping which is trying to realize, by means of the methods which it finds least repugnant, the obscure destinies of the race. Its internal logic cannot contradict the laws of economic evolution. It is organized according to the conditions peculiar to the age. In such a manner as to produce an equilibrium among its diverse forces."

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#### IV

#### *A Night Shift*

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AT A single bound the elevator carried Leclair to the top floor of the factory. There were concentrated all the offices and mechanical departments. Little box-like rooms opened on a corridor. He entered a door and found himself in a room imprinted with the indefinable ugliness which always surrounds the Frenchman at sedentary labor. Around the walls were graphs and tables of calculations. A grey day was reflected gloomily from the wall of a neighboring building through the dirty windows.

He got the current affairs of the day out of the way, ran through the letters on the table, and heard the reports of the foremen.

Martin, the chief puddler, drew his attention to the bad quality of the pigs from the last run. They

gave steels which did not seem to temper well. Short, squat, his rough skin worn to a file-like texture, nearly totally deafened from living constantly where no voice could be heard above that of the metal, Martin had, for long years, stirred the blazing pools of metal with his drawing-bar and could tell the temperature of the mass by visual observation alone as he scrutinized it through half-closed eyes.

He was continually kicking about the modern progress which reduced human initiative to a cipher, substituting mechanical operations for careful work. The engineer, aware of his point of view, smiled at his laborious explanations.

When he went down to the shops, he found the department heads, momentarily idle because of the interruption of current, discussing the accident of the day before.

The event was ordinary enough in itself, but had been accompanied by certain circumstances that aroused general interest. There was a slight feeling of disorder throughout the factory, as though discipline had given away at some point, a feeling strong enough to have been remarked by a stranger to the place.

At bottom, most of the men, in the innocence of their hearts, were glad of this interruption in the daily toil. At the engineers' table there had been more drinking than usual, that was all. If the spectacle of sudden accidental death can afflict us by calling attention to the common destiny of mortals, on the other hand it augments the pleasure of our existence, our precious existence, to know that danger has struck someone else.

Breaking off a peroration he was delivering in the midst of a group, Pillot approached Leclair and interrogated him in a nasal voice:

"Have you seen Morain? Is it true that he knows who did it?"

"Don't joke," put in Valles, a dry little man with a dark skin and black, quick eyes.



"Just the same," replied the other, "there are animals around here quite capable of putting their machines out of order in the most malicious way. Choleur spotted two of them the other day. Communists, they called themselves; they were vowing vengeance as they left."

"He's a hard-boiled man, that Choleur."

"Not at all," protested Pillot, "only just. Revolutionary propaganda here would upset the whole works at a time like this. Over at Anzin, they're still getting out from under the results of the last strike and the lock-out that went with it."

"It's possible," said Valles, "but what does that prove? When you make an accusation like that you ought to base it on absolute facts. Until there's proof to the contrary I refuse to admit that it was done on purpose."

"Well, these repeated accidents . . ." said Pillot, his clown-like face wrinkled by the effort to think. "And Morain taking every word that goggle-eyed pope in the laboratory says as an article of faith. Everybody admires what he doesn't understand, and Selevine has the gift of complicating the most simple things and being ignorant with profundity."

"True. Your mistakes are so simple and obvious that they couldn't hide behind a mountain. When you go wrong you do it with a sort of terrible precision."

"You know, there is a reserve series of load fuses for triple pressures. It has never come into use but once before, and it's extremely difficult to bring it into use even when you're trying. Well, our Pillot here got it at the very first effort and blew out all the fuses. Out of a hundred possible combinations he hit the worst one right at the start. Isn't that wonderful?"

The group laughed. Valles kept on pitilessly.

"Marvelous! The persistence with which you manage to make mistakes

in defiance of all the laws of probability shows a talent, which is really remarkable, even if it does more work in the reverse direction."

"But keeping the alternators isn't Pillot's job," remarked Leclair.

"Somebody had to take Benoit's place and our friend who seizes on every occasion to demonstrate his universal competence, offered his services."

"How's Benoit coming on?"

"Done for," replied Valles simply.

THERE was a little silence. Leclair recalled the scene; the man stretched out, face downward, one twisted foot escaped from his shoe. Julien, his face agonized, kept repeating in a broken voice, "It wasn't my fault. I started the motor up, just as usual, and then, all at once—" Benoit, the wounded man, was screaming . . . He had understood everything when he saw the damaged wall, the roof punctured by the explosion of the casting. Women had rushed in from the neighboring street; pressing around the victims as they were carried out, curious over the sight of the blood, deaf to all remonstrances.

Selevine had arrived, quickly followed by Leclair. His ordinarily pale face had taken on a tint almost apoplectic, Julien explained that he had started the big compound just as usual. The pressure was good, the governor functioning perfectly. As to the load, it was limited to the task of pulling the alternators at the empty. The machine had worked up to its normal speed, when suddenly something snapped. With a strident scream a volley of iron had descended on the men. Fournier had been killed on the spot and Julien had found himself flat on his back, alive only through a miracle.

Lefevre seemed struck dumb. His lower lip hung limp. He took it between two fingers and in twisting it, seemed to recover a portion of his faculties. "Now, look here, you must



have run it at over the regulation speed. You had a drink or two didn't you? Naturally, it wasn't your fault. You all say that. Well, we'll see!"

But the registering devices told the story of a normal running of the apparatus. He tapped the glasses over the registering drums. "The devil!" he murmured, "here's a thin undulating line, and there's one with a sharp break. The accident unquestionably came at exactly nine o'clock. I should have been here." A sudden flare of anger lit up the tiny eyes in the midst of their pockets of fat in the pudgy face.

"Did you think of verifying the pressure? No! I don't doubt it. You were drunk. Why didn't you let me know about it immediately? You don't know—you never know anything. Are you the chief mechanic or not? Stick around, you're going to see something!"

Hurrying to the director's office he reported to Morain.

"Nothing but an accident. Too bad, yes. But like all the accidents, of no real consequence. The turbine will be repaired in three days. I have looked into the matter, it was due to the human factor again. Bad management, negligence on the part of Julien. The fellow drinks. I'll get things in order all right. Don't worry about that."

Later Leclair had learned from Lefevre that the percentage of faulty manufactured articles from the factory had tripled, and that three thousand pigs of iron had just been refused by the Archer firm. Nevertheless the superintendent refused to see any connection between these occurrences.

"The things they're kicking about," he explained; "were turned out by good workmen, men I'll guarantee personally. You know, for some time, the production has not been as good as we would like. Is it due to the poor quality of the raw material or bad workmanship? I don't know. Anyway, I promise you

not to let any wild stories like those you've just been telling me get around. There's no use in magnifying things."

"Lefevre is too obstinate to look at the truth," remarked Pillot a little later. "They've got Tullier to do the investigating. If he finds anything I deserve to be hung. You have never seen him? Imagine a kind of deformed giant with a little head shaped like a rabbit's. He has a mind full of fur; an idiot by construction."

And leaping from one subject to another, he went on:

"Have you ever seen Mme. Morain? She went across the court just now. Elegant, and boy—what a figure! And dressed! She was going to see Benoit's wife over at the Cooperative. Selevine was with her naturally. He has all the chances in the world, that chap."

"Maybe he deserves them."

"Phooey! He'll never make the boss a cuckold; anyway, someone else has beat him to it. As for Selevine, I'd let him take my sister out. You know, with women—"

SELEVINE halted before an electrical machine. His experienced ear had caught an anomaly in its rhythm, without his intelligence being able to assign any definite reason for this feeling. From its heart of copper and iron, energy flowed along the cables like some mysterious blood-stream. On a marble panel nearby were circular dials where needles told the story of this passage of disciplined forces.

By contrast the depths of the foundry were sunk in impenetrable shadows. Selevine's eyes took in the details of a Decauville track, and then gradually accustomed themselves to the obscurity into which he was gazing. Along the ground floor were ranges of completed castings, of raw minerals, of slag and vitrified cinders. In the storeroom piles of bar steel gathered coal-dust. An inde-



finable odor, the production of chemical reduction and mineral ferments, filled the place. Monsters undergoing their period of gestation were there, larval forms drawn from the depths of the earth, waiting for the arrival of the creative forces which would bring them to life.

A pyrometric laboratory had been reserved for his work. He rejoiced over the prospect of laboring there without disturbance. On the blackboard half-effaced figures deployed their columns of arabesques. The calcined stub of his pipe was bitter on his lips. His thoughts became extraordinarily clear, and a sudden enthusiasm seized upon him. For a little while he busied himself with various crucibles, imagined momentarily that he had recovered his happy vein of a few days before. But he tired rapidly, and turned to the transcription of a complex chemical reaction for a respite. In vain; the figures would not come, and sleep clutched at his brain.

In accordance with Morain's wishes he had taken over the duty of superintending the factory for the night; there was a steel contract to be fulfilled, with stiff penalties attached to it. And although the broken machines had been replaced production had fallen off to such a point lately that it had become necessary to work day and night. Luckily, he enjoyed night work. He pursued his studies to the hour of false dawn and then, pressing his face against the window, he had seen the last lights wink out, and had returned to his books with renewed energy, delighted to find his mental powers so clear, his intelligence so active, in the midst of a sleeping world. Such hours are rich with meditation.

He took a few quick steps to and fro to warm himself. They had forgotten to light up the gas radiators, and a glacial humidity mounted from the earth. A little shiver went through him, and he felt a tightened sensation in his chest. The memory

of the pain it awoke had the effect of discouraging him.

He had strained his constitution too far these last months and his body demanded a rest. With some bitterness he remembered his sickly adolescence when a similar lassitude had paralyzed his efforts. The desire for a kind of, animal repose swept over him; he remembered the convalescent hospital where he had spent a good deal of his time. It was a place of roses without savor bounded by a horizon of low hills.

A bell rang. He experienced a certain annoyance. "That animal of a Martin!" he thought. "If he'd only just once get out of his difficulties by himself." He hung up the telephone, but his reverie was broken and he decided to go out.

The events of two days ago still bothered the men, causing them to gather in little groups of two and three and make an elaborate pretence of being busy when Selevine entered the shop. Someone explained that the failure of the power kept them from doing anything, the supply of current being so low that the tools refused to bite when they engaged the whirling masses of metal.

SOMETHING had gone wrong with the main dynamo installation. It vibrated with lessened speed in its cage of iron beneath the glare of a screened light. The bronze fittings, the mass of wires, the buzzing moving parts, threw off little sparkles of light. An electrician, in overalls and wooden shoes, was already at work, but his little tricks did not seem to be having their usual success. He changed the carbons, verified the contact points, went to examine the dials and returned in a meditative mood. Selevine had the smoking dynamo stopped, and hooked up an emergency power unit.

The electric furnace also was not working well, and had to be examined before he could return to his office.



At three o'clock he returned to the shop. Two arc lights were burning feverishly as though insects with flame-like wings had been captured in their globes, and the silence of the night was disturbed by a medley of sounds. Veiled flood-lights illuminated a corner of a tower, a polished, cylindrical surface: a man with a sharp face was ordering mechanics about. Someone shuffled past on silent feet, an oil-can in his hand. A comet-like trail of stars issued from a grinding machine at work on some instrument.

The engineer seated himself in the little look-out post belonging to the foreman. By lifting his eyes he could see the stars through the windows, like another trail of fire-dust, punctuating the vault of heaven. Out there the gods were dead and only an immense nothingness filled the void of cold and silence.

Sometimes Selevine imagined that in the industrial city which surrounded him he saw only the matrix from which the future world would rise. He admired the restless energy, the indomitable will of man, pursuing his dream of pride and grandeur amid the terrors of a quaking planet . . . but more often the futility of all effort was apparent.

At five o'clock in the morning the first gang prepared to leave.

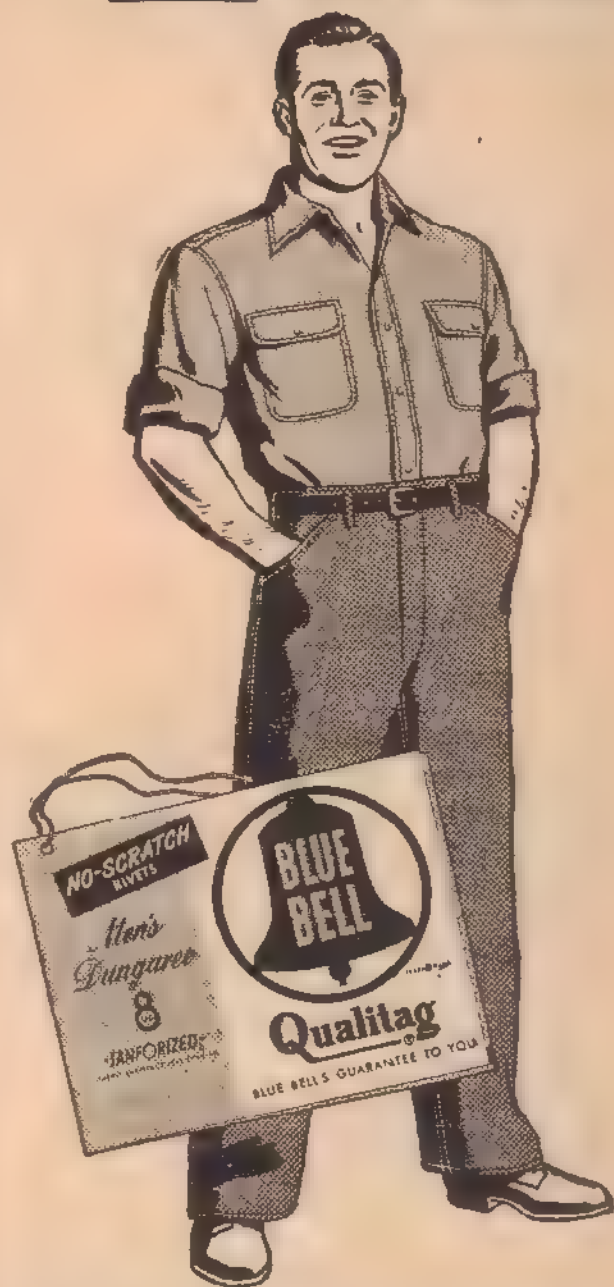
"A day will come," thought Selevine, "when the last tree will perish on an earth sterilized by the efforts of the human race. Then, in place of flowers and forests, we shall see nothing but steely architecture, lifting its towers, swinging its enormous vertebrae and complicated skeletons across the horizon."

Suddenly jets of steam leaped from the roofs of the factories and out of a thousand throats issued strident whistles. The distance woke to a chorus of metallic cries. It seemed to Selevine that here he heard the true voice of the city, plaintive and heart-rending.

It always cried out thus amid the tenderness of the dawn, at the hour when men, drawn from forgetfulness, hesitated on the threshold of

[Turn page]

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the new day. It was a denial of his aspiration toward extinction as an escape from a burden too great to be borne. Day followed day; the same men went through the same gestures without conviction and toiled in the monotonous round in which their sons would toil.

The powerful voices, meanwhile, glorified the industry of iron and fire as it extended its empire over the earth, proclaiming its pitiless law that the efforts of men to escape were vain and would break against the very instruments he had designed for his liberation.

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## V

### *A New Accident*

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TWO months had passed. The castings from the Morain company were showing so many defects that a number of clients, in spite of reduced prices and payments made in advance, were cancelling their orders. The government was more indulgent, but the necessary oiling of official channels threatened to absorb all the profits.

After a careful investigation, Morain had reached the conclusion that he was the victim of some sort of revolutionary plot in which the personnel of his factory had a part, and with some particular object in view.

Guards were placed in the various departments and a sleepless vigil was kept. But it was all in vain.

More than the destruction itself the mystery of how it had been brought about disturbed Morain. Although he had studied the weakened sections under Selevine's guidance with the most minute attention, he had failed to acquire any clear idea of the method that would produce such results. These modifications of the texture of the metal itself, these

dry, dusty knots encysted in the mass, some of them imperceptible to the naked eye and others as big as walnuts; these cinder-like stains, sometimes black and sometimes blue, running through the steel, seemed to have been produced by a process unknown to modern science.

A certain intuition suggested to him that he was in the presence of facts to which the classical formulae of the engineer could not be applied, but he repulsed this idea as the product of an overheated imagination and raged through the same investigations for the hundredth time.

In despair, he again appealed to the authorities to give him protection. The earlier inquiry by the police having produced no result, Inspector Tullier did not wish to bother with the matter any further. He sent two detectives along. Using the ordinary police methods, they succeeded in actually catching a man in the act of sabotage, but when Morain had interrogated the frightened little fellow with troubled eyes sodden with alcohol, he became convinced that the serious troubles in the factory had certainly never originated with such a rat.

The arrest of the workman made a good deal of talk in the city, nevertheless, and at the factory itself there were some who defended his actions. Lefevre, getting wind of this spirit, drew up a list of the workmen who were affiliated with extremist political parties. A few were dismissed. Rewards were offered for tale-bearing and a flood of anonymous letters poured into the office. One of them denounced Julien Laval in the most energetic terms.

A search-warrant resulted in the discovery of numerous pieces of propaganda and letters from different revolutionary groups at his house. Although he had a fairish reputation in the factory up to this time, he was instantly dismissed, and ten others with him. The workers sent a delegation to plead for them,



but Morain's decision was an inflexible one.

**M**ARKED down as an agitator, Lav<sup>7</sup> could find no other job in the district. Fanny, in a sudden access of sympathy and passion for her lover, turned over most of her salary to him.

He trailed from saloon to saloon throughout Denain, finding in alcohol a consolation for his sorrows, and delivering tirades against his former employer. From time to time he would have fits of anger; in this mood he beat his mistress with enthusiasm. But Fanny, weeping, only loved him all the more for his brutality.

Selecting a time when Leclair was alone in the laboratory she begged him to intercede for her lover, but the engineer, annoyed by her pleading, repulsed her with some rudeness.

"Julien," she said to him, "is incapable of a really bad action. He's just weak, that's all. His only fault has been that he listened to that Selevine. He's the one who's really at the bottom of the whole business. You'll tell Monsieur Morain, won't you? . . . Monsieur Raymond."

"Well?"

"You weren't always like this. Someone's been telling you things about me."

"But—"

"I knew it! And naturally, you believed every word they said. You're as blind as you can be and the others are just as bad. When I think how they look all over for the guilty person without the idea ever occurring to them that . . . well, they ought to look a little nearer home, that's all."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You wouldn't believe me anyway. What's the use? Listen, Monsieur Raymond. I've been watching for a long while . . . Nobody ever pays any attention to me, naturally. I've been watching that Russian; yes, Sele-

vine. Please don't go—yet. I must tell you about this.

"I've kept it quiet for a long while. I'm only an ignorant woman, but I have eyes like the rest of you and I know how to use them. In the evening after the shop closes up, I've seen him go all around the machines. He'd walk up to them, and poke into them here and there with those long skeleton fingers of his. I've even felt those fingers on me, yes on my body. But I'm not the kind of girl that gives herself to every man that comes along. I'm scared of that anarchist, besides. He got Julien fired, and he'll do for all of us yet. Tell Monsieur Morain about it before it's too late."

She stamped her foot.

"Ah, if I could only persuade you to put the others on their guard. But he's got himself into everyone's confidence. He's bewitched everybody in the world, even Monsieur Morain and his wife. The damned foreigner!"

Fanny looked up and then came closer to Leclair, looking into his eyes. A burst of enraged merriment filled her throat, and she said rapidly:

"Oh, you didn't know that? Before you came, Mme. Morain was in the laboratory quite frequently. They worked together no doubt—it was really charming! You really shouldn't have come to interrupt their little idyll."

"You're a fool."

He sent her away, reproaching himself for having listened to such silly chatter.

Nevertheless it made a considerable impression on his mind. Certain little things to which he had never paid any attention, oddities in Selevine's conduct, came back to his memory. The surly fits to which the Russian was subject irritated him more than ever, although he could place no definite reason for it. He avoided speaking to him aside from the needs of the daily task.



TOWARD the middle of December the pace of events became more rapid. The lathe-men had to stop work. Their tools no longer bit in spite of frequent grinding. With the planes and milling machines it was the same story. Then, following the trouble with the special alloys of the machine tools, the machines themselves; the castings of their bases were attacked.

A leprosy seemed to run through the compact tissues.

The steel machines, one by one, got themselves out of order. The workmen hesitated to approach those still in operating condition, fearing to have them suddenly explode into a hundred murderous fragments under their hands.

Pillot came to Lefevre one day with the news that two mechanics had refused to make an urgently needed repair on a motor while it was in operation.

"Go do it yourself," said Lefevre.

"Mm—m . . . It isn't as though there were any real danger . . . for men who know how to do the job."

Lefevre looked at him sidelong.

"It's up to the heads to set the example, Monsieur Pillot. We can't have any cowards around here."

The next day Pillot turned in his resignation and two other engineers, Valles and Gallois, followed his example—for the good of the profession. Their departure made a bad impression in the shop and a series of alarming rumors ran through it like wildfire.

The more timorous spirits would have left also, but the fear of being without work detained them. Foreseeing the approaching ruin of the firm and a long period of unemployment before them, they told tales of woe to anyone who would hear them.

A few old grumblers, who had spent their lives over the benches, regretted the loss of the familiar machines. Others rejoiced without knowing why, nudging and winking

at each other when the owner of the factory passed by, morose and silent.

Morain was an oak. In the course of his career he had been through numberless conflicts and surmounted difficulties out of which his character, so far from bending, emerged with renewed strength. But the mystery with which he had been grappling, this battle against unseen forces, was bringing him down fast.

Exhausted by work, he found the cares of the day disturbing his nights as well. The energy to resist the suggestions of fear was somehow lacking.

What did they want of him anyway? To make him shut up his shops and turn more than a thousand workmen into the street? Could he do anything to take the edge from this vindictive hatred? If at least he could have counted on the fidelity of the engineers! But suspicion and jealousy divided even their ranks. Lefevre, with his self-sufficiency, his sterile activity, was futile. Chouleur's brutality became accentuated at the very moment when patience and discretion were most needed, and upset even his own subordinates with his suspicion and clumsy surveillances. Selevine's science was at fault; he avoided the director and spent all his time in the laboratory, while Raymond Leclair was incapable of accomplishing anything that demanded the slightest concentration, and did nothing but think up the wildest of ideas.

For some time, in fact, Leclair had suffered from some indefinite disease of the spirit that put a term to his activity. Incessant headaches seemed to press on his temples. He had noted a slight red rash on his hands, and had attributed it to the influence of the furnaces to which he must have come too near.

As though in a constant dream he heard the confused murmur of the factory, the movement of the fires held him spellbound and a kind of



stupor sapped his powers.

ONE evening he was crossing the department where the first accidents had taken place. It had been closed off to the workmen. Two electric lights burned feebly, and as luck would have it, both went out at the moment when Leclair was passing through. Certain machines glittered feebly. Tiny luminous specks starred the granulated surfaces of the breaks, while the polished surfaces seemed to be reflecting light from some invisible source. The engineer made a mental comparison with the fox-fires in certain marshes. He thought at first that he was the victim of some optical illusion, some curious trick of reflection, but at a distance from the windows and in the shadow of his cupped hands, the luminescence persisted. It was present in every dark corner of the room.

It was seven in the evening.

The grilled windows held rectangles of indigo and the moribund lights flashed redly.

A dull noise could be heard in the distance but all else was silence. Leclair felt somewhat unbalanced by this unusual quiet.

Certain facts he had witnessed now took on a new significance. They were inked by curious similarities under the shadow of this remarkable phenomenon. Invisible currents, radiating from some impending catastrophe, seemed to have perverted the instincts of the animals about the place. Rats had been seen leaving the basement where iron was stored and invading the upper floors. Lights had appeared in the store-room at night.

His imaginative eyes seemed to see in the forms of the machines about him the vague shapes of monsters ready to tear him to pieces.

He felt the weight of his recent lassitude. His head whirled. Nevertheless he continued toward the neighboring department where a

steam engine was housed. About him the forms of heavy levers made fantastic patterns in the gloom.

A faint sound was audible.

It seemed to come from one who was sick or tortured. His heart beating rapidly, Leclair listened; but all was silent again.

Turning to go, he heard the stifled cry once more. It seemed to him that it came from the passage that ran along beside the big engine. Someone hurt . . . .

By means of the little ladder placed there for the purpose the engineer reached the base of the machine.

The uncertain light of a single bulb projected long moving shadows. At the bottom of the narrow space lay a man, his face to the ground.

Leclair recognized the form of Selevine.

He seemed to have lost consciousness. Two fingers' breadth from his head the massive fly-wheel was moving and the connecting rods moved back and forth like sabres to the rhythm of the piston.

Not without difficulty, Leclair succeeded in moving him from his dangerous position and ran to get help. The quitting whistle had long since sounded, and the infirmary was empty, but he managed to find a first-aid kit and hastened back.

His head moving feebly from side to side, his lips colorless, the Russian had half-opened his eyes and was breathing with difficulty.

A woman brought a basin of water and washed the bloody head. Behind her appeared two or three employees, held late at the factory for some reason or other. Finally an ambulance arrived and took away the wounded engineer.

A little later Leclair was explaining to M. Morain,

"Some moving part of the engine must have hit him. The floor is very oily and uneven, and he must have slipped."



"But what was he doing there at such an hour?"

Leclair hesitated. A suspicion rose within him. Finally he told part of his conversation with Fanny. He had attached no importance to it at first, but it was hard to overlook certain suspicious facts.

"Oh, that's absurd!" exclaimed Morain. "The more I think about it the more any idea of human intervention in the phenomena we have witnessed seems infantile. There are breakages of machines and tools over at the Richard factory too. Barrois can't see anything in them but a series of fortuitous accidents. It's impossible. But if they were found to have a similar origin, what would you say?"

"But how can anyone conceive—?"

"Oh, it will all clear up and quite soon, I'm convinced. Don't make rash judgments, my boy, above all when it comes to accusing people of things like that."

Raymond reddened and was silent.

## VI

### *The Conspirators Meet*

THE next morning Morain went over to Levysson's clinic where Selevine had been installed. In a bed, with his head swathed in bandages, the engineer lay with closed eyes.

The doctor had not yet been able to make a diagnosis of his patient's condition, and was troubled by the coma that had followed the delirium of the night before. He told how, at the height of his fever, the injured man had cried out against the ghosts produced by his own fevered brain. . . . "It is the death of iron!" he had cried in a hoarse voice. "We must stop it . . . too late, everything's going to hell. . . . Everything's done for!"

"I had to use an opiate," said Levysson. "The poor chap was much impressed by the events that have taken place at the factory, and his delirium took this particular form accordingly. As a matter of fact such a series of accidents has never happened before. There have been bad breaks at the Richard and at the General Tool Company's factories and more recently at Archer's. My clinic is full of injured workmen. I have heard that it's all due to an organized program of intimidation directed against the heads of the industry. What do you think? The authorities have at last decided to suppress the 'Populaire'.\* There's a warrant out for Totti. Naturally the metal workers' union is protesting."

"My dear man I must get along," Morain interrupted with a touch of asperity. "Let me know how Selevine comes along, I beg you."

Getting into his auto, he had himself driven back to the factory.

As soon as he arrived he encountered Lefevre wearing an expression of complete despair. The giant overhead crane which served the Bessemer converters was out of order; one of the tracks on which it moved had broken under its wheels.

When he reached the shop the mechanics had already put some shoring under the apparatus, but the crane bowed sidewise and threatened to fall at any moment.

"We'll have to get it across the gap. Ah, the motor is wedged. But then—! Chouleur! Where is Chouleur?" cried Morain.

And turning round he almost hurtled into a workman and then perceived for the first time that the others were massed around in a semicircle, their noses turned upward.

"Clear out you! Get going."

The group dispersed, giving way to the breakdown gang. With jacks and pinch bars, some climbed up to where

\*The Populaire is the French Communist newspaper.



the overhead track ran, while others rigged a sort of emergency scaffolding and set up blocks and tackles. A dozen hands seized a rope. Their rhythmic efforts made the muscles on their powerful arms bulge out and the veins in their necks glowed blue. Their chests expanded but the great mass, jammed in its position, refused to move.

Therefore, at all costs, it was necessary to take the weight off the supports.

Lefevre proposed the establishment of a temporary connection with the roofgirders. Would they be strong enough? Everybody discussed the question together. Morain mopped a moist forehead, hesitated and calculating, apprehending the imminent fall of the machine. A few minutes more than nothing could stop it.

In his brain the contending forces ranged themselves in ordered sequences. He calculated their strength and their direction, the resistance of the supports.

With a gesture, he called for silence.

"Chouleur, come here! We're going to turn over the motor of the crane after hitching chains to one of the gallery columns. Do you understand? The crane will haul itself up on its own chain. By wedging it as it moves we can make it pivot in the right direction."

"It's risky!"

"No other way out. Quick, one of you men, get up there and make the connections. Winter!"

"It's—a—"

"You're scared? Marchal, up with you, my boy."

The person addressed, an agile adolescent, peeled off his vest, ran rapidly up the steep ladder, and working along a girder, dropped to the desk of the crane. He moved with caution at first, then became absorbed in his work. The windlassing arrangement was established. Something clanged; there was a blue spark.

SOMEONE swore fervently; then for an instant there was an electric pause, an unstable and menacing silence. Chouleur lifted his head and stood like a man enchanted.

"Look out! Stop!" cried the men, flowing like a tide around Morain, carrying him with them, bumping into each other.

In the middle of the emptied space, a trembling seized one of the anchors. There was a crack, then an exasperated squeal of metal. Someone leaped awkwardly from above. The great crane began to slide. Girders and chains cracked apart, one after another, like threads. The distended links gave way with a clear, ringing sound.

And down it came! With a thunder that shook the great hall of the foundry, twenty tons of steel crashed to the ground, and from the dust-cloud that rose round the wreck came cries, piteous appeals.

That blue thing there, under the mass of torn girders, could it be the broken body of a man? Morain did not want to look at it. But he saw with the greatest clearness what could have been done. His mind, as though unwilling to believe the evidence of his eyes, continued to work out a solution now become useless, when a sound made him look around. With a voiceless cry like that of a wounded beast a man was brandishing under his nose the crumpled remnant of a hand from which several fingers had been torn, and shouting at him.

"You dirty rat! You did that!"

The man looked at the blood almost stupidly, then his pain coming home to him, he pawed at Morain's garments, his eyes wild, his lips foaming. Before anyone could intervene a hostile circle had formed around the owner of the factory.

Pushed, overwhelmed, he tried to make himself heard, but the tumult drowned his voice. He was menaced, insulted, from all sides. Neverthe-



less there were a few voices raised to defend him. Martin stood against the crowd, telling them to be calm, with his great rolling voice. Morain saw Lefevre, terror-stricken, crouching behind a machine. Chouleur brandished a wrench and shouted. "The first man who comes near me! The first . . ." and then suddenly collapsed as a bolt thrown from somewhere struck him squarely in the forehead.

The hostile circle tightened, clenched hands were lifted. A woman in a torn dress screamed imprecations. Morain recognized her and thought dumbly, "What, that old fool, too?" A hand tore at his coat, another struck him on the ear. "Ah, you pups, I'll make you pay for this." He thought of pitiless revenges he would inflict. There was a whistling sound, the smoke suddenly lifted, and the acrid odor of a fire-extinguisher reached his nostrils. He felt his strength give out. He was only a tired old man, in whom all sense of authority was dead.

But already hands were lifting him, others were brushing off his dirtied clothes. He perceived something like a softening of the wills hostile to his, a quick melting of their anger. Around him there were undecided movements, the last effects of anger trying to keep itself alive. Employees were pouring from the neighborhood offices. Lefevre dragged himself to a telephone. Voices rose against the anonymous aggressors; everyone disclaiming responsibility. The rebellion died out suddenly and the old habit of obedience was reasserted.

A gendarme appeared, a revolver conspicuously belted to his hip.

Amid scenes of authority reborn, aid for the injured was organized.

Leaning on Leclair's shoulder, Morain left the building, unable to hear anything but the drum-like beating of his own heart.

"Leclair is right," thought Morain,

"that luminescence came from the steel itself."

CROSSING the laboratory, he pulled the curtains closer together and came back to look at the testing table. The atrocious vision of the man, crushed before his very eyes the day before, returned in the darkness, but he managed to dismiss it.

He examined the fragment of steel once more. Taken from one of the first machines to break down, it seemed to have been rubbed all over with phosphorous. The little dusty spots, the stains noted two months before, seemed to have multiplied. No treatment he knew of would produce such results in metal.

Morain felt that he had touched the heart of the problem and the excitement of the research man on the threshold of a great discovery gripped him. A confused idea that until now he had hardly formulated began to clarify itself in his mind.

The effects he had seen in his factory could not be classified with any known series of phenomena. They were the special results of some new type of energy acting on the matter.

A certain emotion dried his throat, and he repeated in a low voice, and with lips that barely moved the words Selevine had pronounced in his delirium, "The malady. The death of iron."

Yes, that was it! A contagion running through the agglomerations of steel and propagating itself from one piece of metal to another. His reason reeled before so incredible a conclusion.

The method of transmission was doubtless through some metallic dust, imperceptible crystallizations whose dimensions barely exceeded those of the germs which carry the diseases that attack living beings. These germs, attacking healthy metal would engender others of the same species, all radiating outward from



the point where they struck.

Repeated shocks and vibration no doubt increased the effect, for it was in the machines subject to the greatest amount of vibration that the disease had operated most violently. Selevine, without discovering the true cause for the disease, had succeeded in explaining its progress.

Further observations reinforced this conviction. And curious to relate, the certainty that the trouble was not due to enemies but to physical causes, no matter how remarkable, had the result of reassuring the iron magnate.

After the brief bending of his will, now that the peril was known, he recovered all his energy. The man of steel felt that chance had thrown a new and fascinating study in his way; one that he might even turn to some practical advantage.

At least he could defend himself, save his factory, his fortune—his life's work. He made plans, felt himself imbued with new activity.

Forthwith, he summoned Lefevre and traced out for his benefit the main lines on which the struggle would be carried forward; specialists were to be retained for the cleaning up and renewal of the damaged machines; production was to be speeded up and thus, the alarmed rumors which threatened the credit of the company would be stilled.

The chief accountant submitted a series of calculations he had just drawn up. The losses were less serious than Morain had at first thought. He suggested turning the product of the Piennes mines over to the Regie of Azincourt before the quality of the mineral produced became generally recognized as bad, or else exchanging them against realizable coal properties as soon as possible.

The Archer firm would advance two million in credit, but only after an inquiry that could not fail to throw discredit on the factory. Meanwhile the exchange of properties

could be carried through in secrecy.

After glancing over these proposals, Morain resolved to see Mr. Barrois of the Archer firm and tell him of his new hypothesis. He considered him the best metallurgist he knew after Selevine.

As it was already past twelve and he was hungry, he dropped in at a little restaurant instead of going home for lunch.

The communists of the district met there most of the time. The proprietor, a man named Beutier, passed as one of the most ardent devotees of their party. As a matter of fact, he had certain discreet relations with the employers' organizations and passed valuable information along to them from time to time, not because he was really in favor of capitalism, but because of his wife, a good-looking woman who was extremely fond of jewelry, and whose virtue was in proportion to his presents made to her.

RECOGNIZING the foundry-master, Beutier led them into a little room at one side and waited on him personally. Through the crack in the door Morain could observe the bar-room. In front of the bar, and with their backs to him, a group of workmen were talking.

The nervousness, the uneasiness of these usually placid men struck him forcefully. A man from the Archer factory was reporting that a heavy load, breaking loose from the wire rope that raised it, had injured another worker by his side. It was the fifth accident of the kind that had occurred there. The iron in the place seemed to have become brittle.

An old man with white hair opined that for some time an evil influence seemed to have been thrown over the factory, where every day there were more injured, and remarked that the doctors of the insurance companies, backed by the capitalists, were refusing to pay the full amounts of in-



jury benefits.

Thereupon everybody began to talk at once. A young fellow, clad in the blue jumper of a mechanic, banged on the bar. Warmed with his libations he launched into a speech, denounced the capitalists as the ones to blame, declaring that it was a monstrous conspiracy to produce defective goods, so they could dismiss a number of the workers and replace them with more submissive characters. They were organizing a kind of gigantic lock-out.

With the agreeable sensation of having said something fine, he sat down and drained off a glass of wine at a single gulp.

At the Richard factory, Morain found his friend in conference with Camus, one of the directors.

"Ah, you've come at the right moment," said Barrois. "I wanted to see you. As in the other factories, we have been having curious accidents here. It is essential that we take some measures against these strikes and this sabotage before they ruin our industry."

Morain told how he had envisaged the manner in which the enfeeblement of the steels had taken place, piling proof on proof, but without in the least carrying conviction to his audience.

Camus was frankly skeptical.

"It's silly," he said. "Nothing but imagination. An epidemic of metal, no—what shall I say?—an epimetallic. If I didn't know you, I'd think you were joking. But no one ever heard of such a thing."

"I should say not," replied Morain in a voice so decided that the other was silenced for a moment.

"There's an idea in it just the same. Turn a neat profit in the market. You haven't said anything about it to anyone else, have you? Good. If I were certain . . . Anyhow, it doesn't matter whether you have the right idea or not. Afterward there is always plenty of time . . ."

The big man stopped pacing the floor, momentarily pensive.

"Yes, yes—a few whispers here and there . . . the papers . . . to create a certain atmosphere. Take our positions, upset the markets a little and then—the grand coup!" He banged his fist on the table.

Morain bit his lips, already regretting that he had spoken. He had been unable to resist the temptation to astonish his companions by a sensational revelation. He felt himself baffled in the face of Camus' view of the situation. "The old fool is right at that," he thought, his mind entering on the train of speculation on the profits that might result, but Camus would be sure to claim the lion's share. His heart filled with hatred for the other, but he managed a smile as he said:

"I don't want this hypothesis made too public."

"Why not?"

"I'm by no means certain of the facts yet, and would prefer to study the phenomenon and the methods of dealing with it first."

"Oh, that's reasonable enough. Science! Ah, you're a lucky man, Morain, to be able to give your time to abstract research. But you're right. Well, pardon me, but I must be getting along."

From the doorway he nodded to Barrois, but the latter, lost in his own reflections, failed to notice the gesture.

## VII

### *The Disease Spreads*

OH, WE have the best kind of guarantees," affirmed Morain, "or I wouldn't have considered the matter."

Engulfed in one of the big arm-chairs which the director of the



foundry affected as giving an air of elegance to business, Barrois examined his fingernails with attention.

"Afid Bey is a swine," he declared. "He'll accept delivery of the rails and then find some pretext for refusing payment. Now there will be no lack of pretexts as you know. They won't last six months."

"But if they're made of Duro-Fer? You notice that the contract doesn't specify, and I have preferred to cut the profits a little bit and give him something safe."

The engineer repressed a smile.

Leclair, who was present at the interview, observed that they possessed an option on the Zettat phosphate deposits. "If there are any difficulties Levasseur will back us up. He's a friend of mine and has a strong pull with the Governor. There will be a few handouts to make, but that's all in the game in Morocco."

"Well, I'll think it over," said Barrois. "Just now I'm bothered with more urgent questions. The Siderosis is progressing rapidly in my shop. The castings were attacked about eight days ago. Most of the motors have broken down. I don't know how to do anything in the midst of all the complaints we're getting."

"I have mentioned this sickness of iron to my metallurgists; most of them are simply incredulous. Just the same, they are all working like the devil. But the workmen are kicking and we can get production out of them only with the greatest difficulty. They say the steel has gone rotten and that's explanation enough."

"And what do your department heads say?" asked Morain.

"Gautier and Samuel have been looking into the question for several days. Gautier lost a lot of money at baccarat recently, but otherwise he feels he hasn't a thing to worry about. 'Whether it's clumsiness or deliberate sabotage,' he said, 'none

of it would have happened if our foremen were any good.' I tried to talk the 'Blue Devil' to him but he took it as a joke in bad taste. Well, you see I couldn't insist. After a minute or two of silence, he and Samuel told me I needed a rest. Faith, if my whole pile weren't sunk in the business, I would keep my mouth shut and get out."

Morain recounted the similar scene which had taken place in his office when Conrad, the manager of the Douchy mines, and one of the leading figures in the industry, had to come to him to ask him the reason for the rumors that were going about. In vain he had demonstrated to this influential man that the trouble was engendered and had developed without human interposition, according to a process still obscure. He had encountered a man resolutely determined not to understand.

"He reproached me with having tolerated Selevine in my factory and said he had discovered Pierre was a propagandist for revolutionary ideas. Well, you know how it is with Selevine."

"I think he's too intelligent to be sincere about his notions and I have never attached the slightest importance to mere words. He's a bit proud, too. I had no choice. I had to get rid of him or shut my eyes to his opinions, and I took the latter solution as the more practical one, for his services were really indispensable. The whole question is so delicate that we can't be too careful. But I put Tullier on the job and he is making certain discreet inquiries."

"Do you know, in one of Selevine's letters we found a reference to the Siderosis, at a date when we didn't even suspect its existence. His observations helped considerably in pointing the way to the truth. And how can we explain his attitude to Conrad without accusing him? Finally a factory girl



claims to have seen him taking a piece of sick iron into the store-room, where it was found later."

"Tell me, Morain, have you made any new experiments?"

"Yes, and they all confirm what we know in a general way. I have worked with sterilized irons subjected to high temperatures. The transmission of the disease can take place without direct contact and through a solid screen."

There was a knock at the door of the office and a secretary entered, presenting a special-delivery letter to the foundry master.

"It's from Malet," he said, after having glanced over it. "He wants me to come to a manufacturers' meeting tomorrow. Landry arrived at Valenciennes yesterday. Conferences, talking, inquiring and reports; I can see it all in advance. Exchange of notes and papers, an agitation which will gradually be transmitted through a hundred departments and die out eventually, smothered in red tape. And meanwhile our factories are collapsing like houses of cards."

**L**ECLAIR, who was bored, alleged an appointment and went out. On his way to Bellevue he met

Mme. Morain, just getting out of her car and hastened his steps. She was wearing a fur coat that made a frame about her face and her eyes seemed less grey than violet under the blue of the sky.

Raymond experienced a pang of emotion at the touch of her little gloved hand. A certain joy seemed to penetrate his whole being. It seemed to him that the young woman made the whole countryside look better. He asked permission to walk with her as far as Ronceraies.

It was the soft, sweet hour of twilight. Lights had begun to wink on in the distance. The city slept as though in the smoke of a thousand funeral touches.

Near the Escaut they were conscious of the fresh smell of the water mingled with the odors of earth and dead leaves. It was as though a perfume of gentle death mounted from the river's grey tomb, carrying to those who felt it a wave of sadness. All the surrounding country was outlined in sharp relief and had a certain serenity of aspect, like that on the faces of those who have died young.

Leclair asked his companion what her plans for the winter were. Was

## THE ADVENTURES OF

### IT SMELLS GRAND



SNIFF A WHIFF—  
IT SMELLS RIGHT JOLLY!

### IT PACKS RIGHT



CUT TO PACK JUST RIGHT, BY GOLLY!



she going to the Riviera?

Pensive, she did not reply. Remarking for the first time that she seemed preoccupied, he asked the reason.

She confessed to a certain uneasiness.

"The socialist papers are attacking my husband so. They say he is responsible for the crisis and that he's starving the unemployed; yesterday he was booed as he left the factory. Monteuil is backing the movement. He's a terrible man!"

"A fanatic! The communists try to make campaign material out of everything that happens. We're used to them, and I'm really surprised that you attach any importance to their futilities."

"Futilities! Misery, hunger—"

"We can't do anything about it. In this general disturbance the owners are suffering worse than anyone else. Every day another one goes bankrupt. The unemployed aren't the only ones who have their trouble, believe me!"

Mme. Morain was unconvinced.

"What will become of them? I've seen things like that before. I have seen children begging in the streets and troops charging the workers. My father was not liked by his

workmen. By instinct, when I was young, I feared and hated them. Since then, I have come to understand that it's not a one-sided question and I never think of the luxury around me without a kind of vague remorse."

"You forget that the work, the activity of your husband gives a means of subsistence to some thousands of workers. Their lot in life seems hard to you because you put yourself in their places with your refined tastes, your habits and your different instincts. Certain people try to persuade them that they are actively unhappy. How in the world did you come to be taken in by this foolish humanitarianism? Selevine's talk?"

"You still think he was to blame?"

"Who, Selevine?"

"Yes. Haven't you been accusing him?"

"His part in the whole business is so obscure. No one really knows. Certainly he did not create the Siderosis. I imagine the first germs probably appeared spontaneously in the course of the experiments with which he has been busy for so long. Surprised at first, he wished to use them for—"

[Turn page]

## UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



A MERRY SMOKE—Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!



SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. THE LARGE-SIZE CANISTER OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH—IN A BEAUTIFUL YULETIDE PACKAGE—MAKES THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT!



"Absolutely not! Selevine is no doubt capable of acts for which ordinary morality would reproach him, if he thought they would advance his ideals, but that he would stab his friends in the back I will never believe."

"How much heat you work up in his defence," commented Leclair sarcastically. "Oh, I have noticed how he looks at you! The manners of the savage don't displease you after all, do they? Come on, admit it."

He was repentant at the sudden irritation in her eyes and went on rapidly:

"I was joking. Pardon me. Just the same it is curious that we can't talk for a minute without the subject of Selevine coming up. It's a regular obsession. You, a young woman, rich in all the gifts of beauty and mind, sensitive to affection, made to love and be loved—how can you find any pleasure in the society of sociologists and scientists? You are wasting your youth here."

"No. I'm attached to this place by memory and habit. I like it for these reasons and for some others which you wouldn't understand. Now, Monsieur Leclair, you must have a very frivolous conception of what women are like. I don't doubt but that you have known some charming ones whose character more nearly approached your ideals."

Leclair searched his mind for some intelligent reply and was irritated not to find any. He hazarded, heavily, "Perhaps it's because I'm certain you are unhappy."

The whistle of a nearby tug drowned the end of the remark.

The night had almost come, but in the west a greenish light still persisted. Above Wavrechain, pillars of smoke caught a blot of red light that was being slowly swallowed up in the envioning shadows. Cinders borne down the wind danced in the road ahead.

Lighter than thistledown a flake lit on the shoulder of the young woman. Her face appeared a white oval in the gloom, in which the only distinct features were the marvels of her eyes and her encarmined lips, and to Leclair she seemed more mysterious and desirable than ever. What did words matter? In his thought he caressed her unclothed body. He was still absorbed in such erotic imaginings when she turned at the doorstep and extended her hand.

"Good night, Monsieur Leclair. I pardon you your impertinence. Be as kind to others in the future, and be a little more tolerant in your judgments."

MORAIN had succeeded in increasing the resistance of steel to the malady "though without conferring upon it any real immunity" by applying certain physical treatments. After a space of time the usual effects would appear; but the new product was good enough to meet tests specified in contracts and to secure acceptance of delivery. With Gamus he had launched a new enterprise—Duro-Fer, Inc., but the profits fell considerably below the expected figure.

The time was hardly favorable for marketing metals and the wood workers and manufacturers of cardboard were the only people doing really good business. Most of the industrialists, to avoid trouble, had become skeptical of the new alloys of which hundreds were being marketed by unscrupulous firms. But the government departments, attached as they were to their little customs, continued to acquire armorplate and guns whose rapid decay was inevitable. Battleships left port carrying with them the invisible elements of their own destruction. Even the pacifists were horrified at this swift decay of France's armament.

The foundry-master had been



forced to lay off the greater part of his workmen. In the department devoted to the production of fine steels and special alloys a certain activity alone persisted. Chouleur was there deploring the general misfortune with the more sincerity since it involved the end of his own job. Winter with his goat-like head, was with him, and Lefevre, lost in calculations of the resistance of metals, and old Martin, the deaf and stupid.

Morain, assisted by Leclair, worked twelve hours a day in the factory, carrying on the battle step by step. Haunted by a fixed idea, Morain hardly slept, but with eyes wide open in the dark, dreamed of means of getting at the essential essence of the malady and conquering it.

To help him in the laboratory he had hired a little red-faced man who ran down to the foundry every ten minutes to look over the crucibles and returned with a face like a little red sun after bending over the fiery material. Osmond, with a reputation for achievement in metallurgical chemistry, busied himself with the researches that had been Selevine's special forte.

Morain could not but make comparisons not altogether to the advantage of the newcomer. At bottom he regretted that he had ever thrown away what was, after all, the best chance of saving his factory. Even if he were at the bottom of the trouble, the Russian might have repented, repaired at least a part of the damage he had done and brought lucid intelligence to the task that was crushing them all.

The steel man recognized the skinny silhouette of his former assistant on the horizon one night. He was tramping along as though burdened with sorrows, coatless in spite of the cold weather. A kind of pity touched Morain's heart, but the other had vanished into the distance too rapidly to be recalled, even

if the steel man could have made up his mind to do it.

In everything he attempted the same indecision was manifested. He who had always been prompt in resolution, firm of will, found himself perplexed and hesitant before resolving upon the slightest decision. The difficulties with which he was struggling were slowly devouring him.

The aid he received from the government authorities was insignificant. The cabinet, frightened by the amplitude of the crisis, refused to accord any further subsidies to the industry. Investigations went on so slowly in the factories where men of science gathered to discuss the origin of the Siderosis in learned terms. From his interview with the most celebrated of them all, Landry, the foundry-head carried away only the impression of having talked with a very nice old gentleman.

The scientist had caressed his beard, listening to Morain's explanation with a far-away air. Such phenomena were an offense to his reputation, to the Academy and the sacred name of Science, which could not find a place for them in its catalogues. Landry, who had made his reputation in electronics, felt himself personally insulted by the manifestation of a form of energy which escaped all classification. Not wishing to compromise his reputation by snap judgments, he had given the assurance that researches would be carried on along the lines indicated by M. Morain, who from that moment had heard nothing further from him.

The papers, however, had begun to talk about the Blue Evil and their paid campaigns, backed by companies of stock-manipulators, began to create some excitement.

Upon its being brought to his attention, the Prefect of the department du Nord emerged from the torpor into which the prospect of in-



tervening in so curious an affair had plunged him. After having heard several reports, run through numerous files of papers, he reflected for a while and then decided to send a squadron of cavalry to Denain.

The horsemen arrived in the city one morning. The pale rays of the early sun of March played on their polished cuirasses. Arriving at the city hall, they dismounted while the children regarded them admiringly, attached their horses to the trees and went off to eat something and drink a little wine.

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## VIII

### *Delirium*

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AT THE foundry, one morning, the steam engine which furnished the power for the lamps and electric furnaces, the only machine that still operated with regularity, presented unmistakable signs of having caught the disease.

The ear of a trained mechanic is seldom deceived. Chouleur, who worked near the engine, modified the position of the regulating valve.

The machine went on with its normal beat, but a little later the pace speeded up. The light in the rooms grew, the danger lights lit up and the rapid movement of the indicating needles disturbed Leclair, who came to see what the trouble was. He saw Chouleur, fumbling feverishly in a tool box and then saw him attack a safety valve with a wrench. Nevertheless electric current, under the mounting pressure escaped, leaping out in a brilliant flaring of the giant carbons in the Herault furnace where the steel was liquified. Through all the interstices, through the refractory joints in the furnace, flames leaped out, illuminating the room and lighting

up the face of the astonished electrician.

The automatic circuit-breaker went into action, cutting off the current. Lightened, the steam-engine seemed to bound, speeding up its rhythm to a still more furious pace. A sudden shock made the ground tremble. Morain was overwhelmed, Raymond undecided. Chouleur worked at his useless task with the jerky motions of a jumping-jack.

All at once there was a terrific explosion, iron sang through the air, a violent whistling filled the place. It seemed to Raymond that the roof blew outward and then fell back amid tearing flames. Struck by some mass that came hurtling through the air, he lay flat on his back.

The factory filled with cries, the screams of men injured by flying pieces of iron. A superheated vapor burned the eyes, corroded the lungs, and a rain of hot cinders plunged through the escaping steam with a strident hissing sound.

When the men came to help him, Leclair opened his eyes and found himself on the ground with garments empurpled. The mass which had struck him was the body of Morain, which lay by his side, the stomach torn open. It seemed to him that his life was oozing out with the blood from his torn veins. Inertly, he was lifted onto a stretcher . . . .

Leclair opened his eyes again and looked around. A grey dawn was filtering through the curtains lighting up a room he immediately recognized. Why had he been brought to Ronceraies? A remembrance of some kind worried him. His mind finally disengaged itself from sleep and found contact with the exterior world. The events of the day before surged into his memory as a series of fragmentary images. A movement aroused a pain in his shoulder. It was not a nightmare then; the explosion of the boiler, Morain injured, his mouth twisted, his fingers contorted with agony.



Toward the middle of the morning Dr. Levysson came in with various objects necessary for the dressing of wounds. He took the temperature of his patient and declared his progress satisfactory. Raymond had multiple contusions, but nothing of gravity. His left arm, broken in two places, was confined in a sling.

"Well! We're going to have you fit as a fiddle in two months," the doctor declared, drawing the bandages tight, "but you'll have to do everything Mademoiselle Claire says. You were extremely lucky, my fine fellow, to get off so easily. The stoker was instantly killed, and Monsieur Morain was frightfully injured by the pieces of iron which would have hit you if he hadn't been standing right in front of you at the moment of the explosion. But we'll pull him through yet unless there are internal lesions. What is your opinion as to the cause of the accident?"

"*Siderosis* must have gotten to the boiler."

"Oh, come. A malady of iron. I was astonished to hear Morain, who is usually so clear-headed, listening to such rot . . . Well, well, these metallurgists, always looking for something new. Turn your arm a little so I can pin this dressing in place. There! Done!" And he turned to the nurse: "Mademoiselle Claire, you will take his temperature regularly, and don't let him agitate himself. I won't be back till tomorrow; you are not a very interesting case, my dear Raymond."

AS THOUGH to disprove this assertion, the young man's fever began going up about noon. The pain of the broken arm extended upward to his shoulder. As soon as the doctor left, he had wished to speak to Renée, and the sight of the young matron, wearing on her face the signs of her trouble and fatigue, had depressed him profoundly. She had seated herself beside him, taking his hand in

her own icy fingers and bending over him, with the tender flowers of her eyes dampened with tears.

For two days Raymond was delirious, seeing the face of the nurse and the carefully barbered visage of the doctor as though through a fog. Then a noticeable improvement appeared; his temperature dropped and he was able to eat a little. Dr. Levysson told him that Morain, overwhelmed by his injuries, had died the previous evening, in spite of his care.

He left his affairs in a muddled state. The creditors, who had been patient enough up to this time, now came on the run. Leclair imagined Renée without protection in a world of wolves. A flood of energy filled him; he tried to get up and the pain provoked by the effort drew a cry from his lips. The nurse, who came in at once, said, "You really must be quiet."

"Do you know where Mme. Morain is?"

"She has gone to Douchy with her aunt for the funeral."

Raymond lay back among the pillows. He imagined the cortège passing through the streets lined with workmen, to the old cemetery. Renée in mourning, with tragic eyes in a white face. Without the slightest transition the visage of Selevine, sarcastic and fine, slid into the field of his memory.

He thought of the steel company, brought down by the Blue Evil and of the electrical plant at Machou, menaced by an identical calamity, the result of a commercial transaction in which he had been the prime mover. By reason of his having used the good offices of his friends, ten thousand tons of rails and tubes forged at the Morain foundries had gone to carry the plague into the Orient.

Certainly, several months before, the manifestations of the Blue Evil had not been clear. One could almost have denied its existence. That ought



to reassure even the most meticulous conscience for having yielded to the desire to make a fat commission.

But in the solitude of his room the excitement of his injuries filled him with a series of exaggerated scruples. This state of mind seemed so abnormal to him that he felt his own pulse and discovered that he once more had a fever.

**T**HERE was a mass-meeting at Lourches and the assembly room of the old school was jammed to the bursting point with the unemployed.

It was early in the evening and a light fog covered the city. Now and then voices and cries were audible. The clamor would reach a maximum often punctuated by a shot. A band of workmen went by, brandishing coupling bars and singing a revolutionary song.

A month before, the principal factories of the region had been forced to halt all work and to lay off their personnel, and the troubles were increasing.

The Iron Syndicate, subsidized by the Employers' Committee, organized bread-lines, but the staffs broke down under the work. There were disputes which quickly became miniature riots. The jobless went to demonstrate in the city, accusing their former employers of wishing to starve them. They poured around the factories, breaking everything they could lay their hands on out of a sheer spirit of mischief. The effervescence reached Condé, Peruwelz and Mons. Streetcars were halted in the streets and trucks pushed over on their sides. Nevertheless the miners remained calm for the most part, but the workers in the glass, cloth and type-metal industries, after agitated meetings, voted to strike.

The situation became complicated. The heads of the industries showed the most conciliatory spirit in general, but some of them, brought to the verge of ruin by the failure of

production, tried to provoke a general lockout.

The demand for iron fell and fell, its value dropped off by a third, but on the other hand, certain alloys advanced in price. Those who had stocks of sound steel showed themselves in no hurry to end a situation which was enriching them.

Unscrupulous dealers threw on the market at low prices, tainted goods whose character had been cleverly camouflaged. In the financial markets of the world came the first skirmishes that were the prelude to the inevitable conflicts. The crisis had come on so rapidly that various interests mixed and clashed in the most confused fashion.

The Labor Federation addressed an appeal to the working classes, setting forth the danger of any precipitate action and counseling patience. The heads of the Federation tried to work out a solution that would conciliate all antagonisms with the aid of the Ministry of Labor, but without reaching any decisive result. All the delays involved only irritated the workmen, and while many, deprived of all means of earning their bread, spent their time in threats and lamentations, others voluntarily walked out of the factories.

The iron-workers had chosen Comrade Laval as their delegate. When he had a few drinks he could talk quite well. The circumstances under which he had been dismissed from Morain's brought him much consideration in labor circles. After repeating it a hundred times he had come to believe he was a victim of the feudal capitalism personified by Morain, that man of prey, that veritable vampire who was fattening on the blood of the people.

From the floor of the great hall the air vitiated by human exhalations, blue with pipe-smoke and the fumes of oil lamps, the gesticulating figure was barely visible. His auditors tried to make out his words.



"We can't hear you!" cried someone.

He raised his voice.

"The iron sickness will destroy the bases on which this iniquitous society rests and will aid our liberation. Comrades, a single movement on your part and the whole rotten structure will come down. The occasion is unparalleled; don't let it go by. Don't give our enemies time to organize. Declare a general strike now!"

He halted. He had recognized a well-known figure in the hall.

"I announce to you the presence of two spies from the manufacturers' committee," he cried, and his finger pointed toward Leclair and Barrois, the former smiling, the latter a little pale at this singling out. There were exclamations and a long whistle, but the president of the meeting intervened.

"We announced an open meeting and these gentlemen are perfectly free to come here and speak if they like. By respecting their presence we will demonstrate to those who sent them how workmen conscious of their rights and dignities behave themselves."

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## IX

### *Into the Mine*

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THERE was applause. A remark from Laval woke the crowd's sense of humor. Low jokes rained around these sons of the upper classes in their stiff collars. But there was a diversion from without and a general rush toward the door as the lugubrious sound of the fire-engine was heard.

"Another one!" exclaimed Barrois. "That makes eight in a week. Well, that's more than a little over the average. Inexplicable! At least—"

he looked about him—"at least if chance has not been aided slightly. But look, it's the gas-works." And urged on by that curiosity which always draws human beings toward accidents, he hastened his steps, pulling Leclair along after him.

There was assuredly much activity in the street; men dashed to and fro carrying lanterns.

A light broke out somewhere. The three big gas tanks loomed up, huge and squat. From one of them a long tongue of flame escaped to run across the top, joining with another one and illumining all the surroundings.

Buildings shot out clearly from the shadows and seemed to recoil before the invading light. The factory, the slag-piles, the casting channels, stood out precisely.

Through invisible cracks the flames drew forces that increased their strength. They mounted rapidly; streaked with yellow and purple, turning in huge spirals, floating here and there like the movement of draperies. The roofs of the tanks curled and spotted; the steel-work reddened and then melted.

The affair took on a certain wild grandeur. A twisting column of flame, thirty feet tall, a mushroom of smoke with bloody reflections, lifted above the burning reservoir like a gigantic torch.

The firemen after a brief and fruitless effort, had given up hope of mastering it. A black cloud, filled with golden streaks, covered the place, and its soft ramifications, filtering upward into space, fell back slowly like a snowstorm. Sometimes, as though torn by internal forces, this cloud heaved up in the center and the invisible crater vomited new columns of fire.

The people of the neighborhood were warned to get their goods out of their houses.

"Are we going back?" asked Leclair impatiently.



Barrois had taken him by the arm. "As a matter of fact," he said, "no one has realized the gravity of the situation yet. In the Department du Nord there are already a hundred thousand unemployed. Why are they delaying their transport to regions where conditions are not so bad?"

Leclair did not care to know. He listed idly to his companion, finding his remarks full of good sense, but more than a little boresome. Nothing could really endanger his faith in his own future, the only thing in which he any longer had any faith. He was still lost in the happy astonishment of his victory, which he had never believed would come so promptly.

In the affliction of her recent bereavement, Mme. Morain had wished to delay his advances, recoiling from what other people would think; even Leclair himself had wished to temporize, but circumstances had decided otherwise. The animal instincts control us in curious ways and they had yielded to them at the very moment when they were rendering a proper respect to the dead.

Leclair had undertaken the more delicate business affairs of his late employer, and in his preoccupation had, so to speak, not had time to organize his emotions. His new position opened many possibilities for him, possibilities which, by a kind of modesty, he did not wish to envisage in all their completeness, but possibilities which reinforced his feeling of optimism.

He smiled, remembering the slightly frightened air of his companion, surrounded by the dull workmen and their children. Then a sudden thought made him pull out his watch. It was late; and Barrois' discourse showed no signs of reaching its end.

"Day before yesterday," he was saying, "Renaud delivered a lecture on the iron sickness, and asked that a national subscription be opened to check its advance. Would you believe it—there were only about twenty

present. The lack of curiosity of the Parisian public about everything that does not directly concern its interests or its pleasures is really something stupefying. If they were only merely indifferent! But the socialists are openly rejoicing at the spread of the *Siderosis*, which is hitting the capitalists first."

LECLAIR repressed a yawn. He hesitated a moment, searching for some pretext for flight, then deciding, remarked about the pain in his arm, still not completely knit.

As a precaution he turned toward his own street first, then making a circuit headed for Ronceraies.

Morain's housekeeper, Miss Buick, an old maiden lady afflicted with genuine English acne, received him with the utmost cordiality. She was occupied in sewing on some garment while Renée was reading in the golden circle of light cast by a table-lamp.

He waited a moment at the door, hardly daring to break in on the silence, and finding the charm of this intimacy doubly pleasing after the turbulence of the streets. At the slight odor of iris in the room the beating of his heart increased.

The young woman, who had been waiting for him, reproached him with leaving her alone in the solitary house. In spite of her smile a trace of genuine fear lurked in her eyes.

He tried to draw her to him.

"Dear Renée, every hour away from you is like a penance."

She halted his gesture and placed a finger on his lips.

They passed into the salon. Candles were burning down in an antique candelabrum, lighting up polished bronze and marble.

As Mme. Morain received a good many callers during the course of the day they had agreed to keep up appearances by having him call on her only late in the evening. It followed that Raymond would tell her

how he had spent his day.

"I was with Barrois when I felt the need of coming to see you. It was altogether irresistible. I left him quickly without even shaking hands with him. The poor man must think I'm a little cracked since my accident. I took him to the mass-meeting, where we were recognized. He was really quite frightened."

He laughed over the memory. His little, fine teeth shone under his well-designed lips. Mme. Morain admired his youth, his gaiety. She drew him closer to her.

"What have you decided to do?"

"Oh, we'll have to leave. As soon as I have realized on the stocks at Aulnoy."

"Oh, let's! Let's get away from the Nord, leave this unhappy city. I would so like to forget. I need calm and repose."

There were many things to disturb her there. Creditors, lawyers, trying to get this or that from her, pursued her ceaselessly. She complained of the attention of Camus. That chubby personality was paying his court to her and at the same time demanding payment on unfulfilled contracts. Couldn't she somehow make him understand that his presence annoyed her?

Leclair's face took on a little frown.

"No, it's impossible now!" Since she had left her interests in his hands she must let him make the arrangements. Camus was a pig, but an influential pig whom it was necessary to avoid antagonizing.

She sighed. He turned to her once more. His lips caressed her bare arms, her lips. The young woman pushed him away after a moment, and he thought she was annoyed, but saw her cross to the door and turn the key . . .

THE reason why a new outbreak of accidents from the rotting steels occurred at this time was gen-

erally unknown or misunderstood. Many scientific minds refused to admit the possibility of a mineral malady, and hunted for explanations in the arsenal of classical formulas and molecular physics.

Others completely denied what they could not understand. An American scientist affirmed that they were in the presence of a case of collective suggestion. This hypothesis found resolute partisans in France.

Nevertheless, the Bureau of Tests, issuing from its prudent reserve, sent the first commission of research into the devastated regions. Renaud published the results of his researches on *Siderosis* in the mines. The general public began to be interested in the question. A popular song, "He Can't See Nothing But Blue" was launched in Paris and enjoyed a wild success.

Renaud, a physician who studied astronomy as a side line, curious about everything, had followed the work of Morain with some interest. Renaud was well known in society and wrote a good deal for popular papers. His articles described such subjects as the immensity of sidereal space and the Einstein theory of time in a form not too difficult for untechnical minds to follow, and tied up these concepts to ideas of the most ordinary, or rather the most Parisian, character. The bankers of the city as they rode through the subways in the morning, absorbed diverse facts, faintly perfumed with philosophy, and the combination gave them a flattering sense of their own importance. It is not bad from time to time, to cast a glance at the end of existence and man's littleness in the infinite universe. After all man is a thinking animal; they taught us as much in college.

A great daily paper hired Renaud to study the action of the sick metals on the human body, and he left to explore the iron mines at Fontoy, where the *Siderosis* had struck with



especial vigor.

These deposits, situated to the west of Thionville, are formed primarily of a hydrated hematite with phosphate intermixtures.

Mining operations had once taken place on the surface but were now subterranean, and for several years the hills of Andin had been tunneled by superimposed systems of galleries. As a result of the breakdown of the pumping systems, most of the mines had been inundated, but even before they had become utterly unworkable the miners had fled from the radiations of the minerals.

THE skins of those who had remained at work became covered with little sores which burst and peeled like small blistering burns. Surface ulcers formed and scarred over and the skin was colored a bluish purple by the action of the radioactive minerals.

"Care must be used," Renaud wrote, "I'm going down into the mines, because of the destruction of the ladders, the infiltrations of water and the possibility of falling roofs. It was not without difficulty that I persuaded two miners to accompany me. The cages were not in operation, of course, and it was by a series of narrow emergency passages that we penetrated to the heart of the mine, six hundred feet below the surface.

"Everywhere the traces of hasty abandonment were visible. The ground was piled with debris, with little trucks on their broken rails. Mining machines, picks, and broken shovels were mixed with clay and minerals fallen from the sides and ceilings.

"We arrived before an underground lake, surrounded by sulphurous ores. In the depths of the mother waters the patient forces of nature had given birth to delicate crystalline designs. Strange flora! The petrified lines had a harmonious equilibrium. The light of the torches

showed the place in all its strangeness and picked out the rhythmically dripping drops of water. Here and there shining rhomboids stood out, stalactites amid the purple rocks, with a splendor at once massive and barbarous.

"The further we descended into this place ravaged by fire and water, the greater the brilliance grew. Our shoes crushed piles of snowflake-like designs and the pressure of a hand against a wall was sufficient to bring out a series of ephemeral lights. They slept a leaden sleep beneath the water-pools but a stone tossed into the pool would wake them all, and pale, irised reflections, cold flares, would run across the surface.

"In a breath of vapor the torches flared and smoked. When they were extinguished an unexpected light was visible, a light secreted by the atmosphere itself. It is difficult to give an exact idea of its character. It was made up of an obscurity and a light in some odd way interacting, a night like those of the polar regions when all the auroras are awake, calm and sinister, with an illumination that seems to come from behind the earth.

"Ill at ease, disconcerted with my own feebleness, I breathed with difficulty the humid air, poisoned by the same pestilence. The reason for the feeling became apparent as we stumbled on the carcass of a horse which barred the course of a rivulet. Its frightful thinness indicated that it had been abandoned living in the mine. A multitude of dead rats, their white bellies in the air, strewed the ground around it.

"As I examined the little corpses, the sound of a shattered crystal suddenly attracted our attention. My stupefaction can be imagined on discovering, in a kind of niche, a man occupied at a task altogether incomprehensible. A tripod loaded with various instruments stood by his side. He looked up with surprise at

hearing us, and without giving me time to speak, said, with a strong English accent:

"Look out, there are wires along there. Turn there and walk carefully. Watch out!" He held a photographic plate before the light.

"I am Austin," he said, 'of the Roval Institute.'

"And when I presented myself, he added:

"I am just finishing my work; important work. This malady of iron interests you, too?"

"Certainly."

"And you don't know the worst of it yet. I say this: there is going to be a prodigious upset, not in our century, but during our lives. You will see. If I told you—by the way, I am very glad to have met you, Dr. Renaud."

"He had taken me familiarly by the arm and began to tell me about his theories. I perceived that his left arm was bandaged, hung limp at his side and that there was a bleeding wound below his collar.

"Where does that come from?" I asked.

"Radiations from the mineral. There is a definite projection of finely divided matter and an emission of waves. The latter are the more dangerous. Look—the walls are lukewarm. The iron is decaying rapidly and its internal energy is escaping on every side."

"He remained thoughtful for a moment, his eyes half-closed behind their huge-glasses and his finger pointed to an evidently gangrening mass.

"Those aggregates of matter are returning to nothingness. Men, working with iron for thousands of years, has permitted unknown forces to develop in the metal itself. This is the fruit of his labor and what a monstrous product it is! What do you say, Austin? There is no Blue Evil, only a mutation of the ferro-carbonic species."

## X

### *Decay*

SIX MONTHS after the death of Morain there remained of his foundries only the wreckage of two hulls. The rest had become a mound of fallen girders and stones. Long ossicles of iron projected from the tangled mass of bricks and concrete, the dissolving skeleton of the monstrous corpse on which the elements were now finishing their work of destruction.

A vague curiosity drew Selevine to the field where matter was suffering and dying. He tried, one day, to work his way into the bay where the contagion had become manifest for the first time. There, beneath the staggering roof, he was struck dumb by the tormented forms which still held a little of the aspect of the machines they had once been. Now they had become greying blocks starred with phosphorescent spots, swelling with pustules and knots—the final form of the disease.

The plates were bending and curling like autumn leaves. Bars were tortured into spirals. Inextricable twistings suggested the appearance of living plants, of groups of algae or black roots twisted out of the earth by some force of their own. The slag heaps were covered with the windings of horrible ring-worms and ulcers had broken out on all the piles of unused ore under the force of the internal decay.

There were certain places, like spongy ashes, where some unknown form of lichen detached itself and fell at the visitor's tread. One trod into the ground, dry, dead things that cracked like old twigs, squashed lukewarm fermentations into the earth as one walked. Further on the rain had leached out the remains into



a thick, soup-like pool up through which nettles and other quick-growing plants were pushing to cover the ruins with a verdant tapestry.

"Iron is returning to the maternal earth," thought Selevine, "but is it still iron?"

The circumstances through which these phenomena had shown themselves returned to the engineer's memory. A reminiscence, an image situated on the borders of memory, became clearer. Suddenly he recalled the appearance of the meteorite Fontaine had given him a year before, a fragment of lava scintillating with strange blue lights. It had the same appearance as the sick steels in the last stages of their decomposition.

The truth he had felt for a long time became clear in his mind—the origin of the Siderosis was extraterrestrial!

An emotion invaded him. The revelation struck him with an almost physical impact. "Crucibles of fire, the shock of stars, tornadoes in the taciturn depths of space . . . and look at the result of these titanic efforts—a calcined stone, containing, like a funeral urn, the germs of death."

He thought of the feebleness of man, once the master of all forces and king of the earth—thanks to the machines he had conceived. And the frightful problem of what would happen if all matter, the substance upon which the precious forces of life depend for existence, should suddenly give way, presented itself to his mind. Like a body without a skeleton, human civilization would collapse.

Already all the neighboring regions had a foretaste of the impending destruction.

In Belgium and Lorraine the tall furnaces were rusting; the forges of Ongres, the factories of Ravange, Joeuf and Moyeuve, were completely destroyed. The damage had reached the Luxembourg mines and

the Rhineland deposits, where the importation of French irons had been forbidden too late. The metal marts of the Saar, the ports of the Ruhr, all slept, and the flotillas of steamers which carried the iron and oil to Belgium and Holland lay moored at their wharves side by side. At Ruhrort the warships slowly dissolved in their basins. The heavy waters carried a foam of rust down to boil against the bridge-piers.

TOWARD the month of September all machine traffic with the north and east of France became irregular. Combustibles were not to be had at any price, and all public lighting was discontinued in Roubaix and Valenciennes. Only in the railroad stations did a few agonized flares burn to show the sad disorder of everything around them; accumulated goods of every kind, materials falling to pieces, cars immobile and rotting. Touched in their most vital parts, all their most delicate mechanism broken, the railroad services were at the end of their resources. Misery brooded over France.

The collapse of the markets, the growing and general unemployment, the distress of the laboring classes without means and without bread placed before the government agonizing problems which it sought in vain to solve. As events progressed Deputy Lebon came out of the shadows where his ambition had cast him, and by a series of intelligent suggestions, captured popular favor.

His promises to do something about it began to be borne out when his brother-in-law, manager of the Chiers factory, received from the government an order for five million francs' worth of arms and armor plate. Nevertheless, the Chiers establishment, hard hit by the general depression of Novem-

ber, went down in the failure of the General Metals combine, precipitating a financial scandal in which the new minister, betrayed by his colleagues, saw the finish of a political career which might have become extremely useful.

Under the pressure of public opinion, the Chamber voted new laws against speculation.

They failed to touch the magnates who were engaged in the combat for the coal and iron industries. There were several suicides. On all sides French values fell off on the foreign exchanges. The money market became the scene of frenzied speculation. Banks began to take measures to protect themselves against the possibility of riots.

The amplitude of these troubles upset foreign exchanges. At first commanding high prices in world markets, American and German steels began to feel the influence of the general depression. Tariffs boosted to the skies killed off all hope of profitable operations. A universal distrust caused buying to fall off. All industries were menaced.

It was at this time that the steel magnates of the Rhine laid the foundations of an international understanding. It was necessary for all steel men to ally themselves against the common enemy. After some hesitation, Pittsburgh and London joined the Cartel. Important firms rallied around it. The Steel Trust, the great railroads, set optimistic rumors afloat and their agents, by a series of careful maneuvers, succeeded in halting the fall in values.

A consortium of bankers took things in hand at Denain and forced some of the damaged factories to a new vitality. The workers of the region and specialists from every country in the world were called in. Technicians, with an enthusiasm aroused by the promise of huge rewards, attacked the problem of the contagion directly.

There was, after a period of dis-

order, a fever of work.

Iron work was replaced by wooden beaming; machines and cables received hourly inspections with the assistance of newly invented apparatus. Concrete props sustained the weakening roofs. Steel was purified in the tall furnaces of Longwy and then sent to the forges of St. Dizier and Creusot.

Hammers beat the burning masses, rolling mills flattened them with fervor, cold water seized on them with a strident hissing. They circulated through the forge-shops, turning to heavy ingots with depths of purple light.

Cooled beneath their igneous crusts, the virgin iron and fresh copper were encased in sheets of lead. Loaded barges and tugs plowed the Meuse and Escaut in long lines.

IN THE railroad centers the movement of life commenced again, the broken communications were made good, the cables were restored, the infected parts carried away, and the cars which had rusted to their rails, resting like regiments of ants around a sugar-heap, moved with a plaintive rhythm. The locomotives whistled once more as inspectors pounded their sounding wheels. Orders and shouts mingled with the clang of bells behind windows. The struggle was carried on above and below the earth.

The steel vibrated to the shocks of the wheels, the plates resounded with the deafening uproar. No one dared to think of the consequences of an accident, of an enfeebled rail or a wheel suddenly blocked. Anxiety was in every heart. So much the worse, then! Man, carried along by the tumult he had created was unable either to stop or go back.

The task was facilitated by the establishment of emergency electrical lines. From the generating plants at Lille torrents of energy



flowed down the cables. A thousand bulbs lit up in the factories and yards. With cries of joy the inhabitants saw the familiar stars of their nights reborn.

Electricity was, nevertheless, distributed thriftily. In spite of all precautions, the generating mechanisms that had once been touched by the *Siderosis* did not work well, even after repairing. After several ineffectual efforts, the engineers gave up trying to use the electrical machinery of the region. Every night the shadows encroached a few more steps.

Only the saloons punctuated the night with attractive lights. Leaving their factories, the workmen found in these airless rooms rendered stuffy by the smoke of bad tobacco, the cherished habits, the familiar vices without which life is no more than a monotonous torment. The sharp beer foamed into their glasses to be left standing. They drank gin, they played cards, they watched cockfights on tables cleared off for the purpose and bet a week's wages on the result. Placid, jocular Belgians were prominent among them. Foremen, dressed to the minute, swallowed costly cocktails. Synthetic blondes sold their well-born bodies. The raucous or sonorous syllables of a dozen different dialects mingled.

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## XI

### *The Coming of Revolt*

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A WHOLE heterogeneous population, attracted by the hope of high wages and in a vague way, by enormous illegitimate profits, had invaded Valenciennes, where the Reconstruction Committee had its headquarters, brought in by the committee which was looking for cheap labor anywhere, without in

the least worrying about the effect of these importations on the labor of their own country.

The unemployed and the strikers avoided mixing with this floating labor, and assembled at Raismes.

Super-excited with alcohol, their cries and songs in the streets would wake the shop-keepers, who trembled behind their barricaded windows. The pillage of the factories had become a veritable industry; the more advanced papers even encouraged such robberies. "It is a right for the famished people," they proclaimed, "a reprisal against the profiteers."

One morning at one of the shops two watchmen were found dead, their throats slit. The chief of police increased the number of gendarmes. Army reservists made nocturnal rounds, but as there were so few of them they could stop neither the pillaging in which half the population was engaged nor the work of destruction the unemployed were doing.

The gendarmes were clumsy and often brutal. When they went by on horseback through the narrow streets, squeezing the pedestrians against the walls, the women, certain of their immunity, hurled insults at them. Stones flew through the air; a horse, hit, would rear. The man who did it was always lost in the crowd.

These incidents multiplied. In all the coal pits the workers were agitated. Those who had approached too near the sick irons bore on face or arms the scaly traces and empurpled ulcers of the radio-dermic action. These superficial traces were sufficiently painful to spoil the sleep and sap the energy of the sufferers, and on them disorder seemed to produce an intoxication like that of alcohol.

The railroad uniting Valenciennes to Tournai was cut. For a hundred kilometers the trains could not move.

Several businessmen without scruples began to speculate in food. This was the basic reason behind the bloody days of January.

Men struggled desperately with the Blue Evil, and their creative energies seemed to strike an equilibrium with the forces of destruction for a moment. Then the plague began to gain once more. There was a period of dread, the calm which precedes the tempest. Then came a time in which the malady of iron was almost forgotten in the social conflicts which it indirectly provoked.

Paris remained calm. There were several murders of course, and a few stupendous robberies, but these ordinary events were not the general rule. The fall of the Eiffel Tower, which had been constructed in an age of great metallurgical advance, the collapse of the subways, provoked nothing but a little mild conversation. Human sensitiveness became hardened to stories of violent death.

The meetings of the International Iron Cartel had drawn a crowd of foreigners to the capital. The devaluation of money gave a temporary stimulus to business. Stores, theatres and night clubs joined in a remarkable and unexpected prosperity. If the country were becoming poorer the merchants speculating in exchange and food products benefited by the difference between the actual prices of articles and the salaries paid in paper, and rapidly amassed fortunes.

THE people accused them of being insatiable. But how else could they accumulate the capital which would enable them to speed up production and thus aid the masses? At least this was the question which most economists put. To despoil them was to bring ruin on the thousands to whom they gave employment. Money obeys strict laws. It circulates like the blood in the veins,

carrying with it life and well-being before returning to the source from which it has issued. If the movement ceases for a single day, society will perish in agony.

Three enormous balls and a benefit performance at the Opera were organized for the benefit of those without work. But from this splendid charitable effort hardly the slightest wave reached the suburbs where the hungry were besieging the bakeries. Children roamed about at night, disinterring half-grown beets and potatoes in the fields.

Six more corporations were put out of business by strikes. The heads of the textile industry, unable to get coal, closed their factories. The coal remained in the ground, and ships without fuel floated like coffins in the black waters of the canals. The trees in the parks gradually disappeared. No light reddened factory or forge, but occasionally a pillar of smoke would rise against the horizon of fog as some store of wheat was fired in reprisal against its owner.

Extremists found in these events an admirable occasion for their propaganda. One of the heads of the left-wing parties, Citizen Pinchon, secretary of the Metal Workers Union, ran throughout France, organizing *methodical* disorder. He tried to bring the workers out of their apathy by telling them of needs they had not considered before.

He had begun life as a factory boy, but had gone to night school and turned out badly. He wrote pamphlets in which a just resentment over the wrongs he himself had suffered mingled with a viciousness of spirit which even his best friends found insupportable. These writings, rich in poisons, were distributed in profusion among the working classes.

After one of his propaganda tours Pinchon let loose the following



cynical statement:

"The people have lost the taste for good figures of speech and can only be aroused by out-of-date ideas. Their imaginations, inspired by moronic movies, do not go beyond their individual potentialities and are degraded by the lowest of appetites. We can do nothing against this universal indifference and stupidity."

The directors of the great trusts were not impressed, and would have desired at least one violent conflict that would definitely break the revolutionary forces. They feared those sly hostilities and partial strikes which exhausted an industry like a fever. In order to please them the government adopted severely repressive measures. In expectation of a general strike large stores of cereals were gathered and black troops called in from Africa, as being the most useful in police work and immune to propaganda.

These children of the sun, torn from their primitive barbarism, had received excellent elementary educations. Beside the sound theories with regard to respect for force and wealth with which they had been inculcated, they had been brought up in a notion of warlike honor.

Their shoes seemed to know by instinct just where it is necessary to kick a man in order to produce in him a beneficial contrition for his misdeeds. If, in the exercise of such functions, they were called upon quite frequently to provoke the poorer classes and particularly the unemployed, it was not by accident, but by enlightened choice, the result of deduction and reflection—truly noble processes of thought.

THE jobless had become a veritable social plague. They accepted their ignominious misery, one would have said, with something like pleasure, troubling the rich in the enjoyment of their profits with-

out any gain on either side, and disturbing the thoughts of ideal justice. However, they could be annoyed in a number of ways with considerable ease. They were unable to defend themselves. This was, as a mathematician would say, sufficient reason. In fact this defencelessness is one of the strongest props of moral principle, a support which could not be removed without bringing down the whole of society.

The black brigades were very popular among the people who had work, artisans, salesmen, and so on, who on Sundays went to the drill-grounds at the edge of the city where they watched the blacks as with nude torsos they went through the exercises of sabre use and bomb-throwing. Curious about things military—animated by patriotic fervor and sometimes by inexpressible desires—the women pressed around the fences that surrounded the drill-fields.

There also the little disciplined troops of the National Militia came for their exercises. Having replaced their civil clothes by a uniform coat, a shirt of white silk and a velvet beret, their numbers grew with rapidity. Lively amazons accompanied them. When they passed through the streets, proud and erect under their embroidered flags, a murmur of admiration was always heard.

While the militia were received everywhere as liberators, the jobless encountered universal reproach. They had acquired the deplorable habit of holding their gatherings in open air, of assembling in hostile groups in front of the theatres and fashionable restaurants where they annoyed the eaters engaged in the peaceful labor of digestion.

One morning they gathered in a crowd of twenty thousand strong and marched through the boulevards in good order; men mutilated

in the factories at their head. The police turned them aside without undue violence, and they poured through the exterior avenues to the city limits.

A man of uncertain age, his face bearded and lined, his clothes shabby, his air sad and depressed, mounted on a little hill and held a paper close to his glasses. It was Grammont, the only man who, from the beginning, had undertaken a sincere defense of the laborers. He lived in the hope of some day seeing the reign of justice and peace established and he preached the love of one's neighbor, the despisal of riches, and—vegetarianism.

Events had drawn him from his retreat, and vague general ideas, to take a part in the solution of immediate social problems. He had been a professor in an academy for young girls and to this fact he owed it that he had not been accused of anything extraordinary in the line of vices, but only of the seduction of minors. With his position lost, abandoned by his friends, avoided by his former colleagues, he expiated the detestable insolence of having freely expressed his opinions.

On the grass strewn with oyster-shells and melon-rinds, the proletarians considered, with a combination of mockery and disgust, this man of whiskers and papers, this bourgeois who had come over to their side for some unknown reason. His feeble voice hardly reached their ears. They were bored. It was with pleasure that they saw Deputy Lebon take his place.

The deputy was clothed with a studied vulgarity that marked him as a true son of the people who would never deny his origin. His speech, at once violent and pathetic, against the government, swept all doubt about his integrity away and at once restored him to the confidence of the extremist parties. He described the

misery of the working classes and ended thus:

"The government has refused to provide government department stores; it has suppressed cash payments to the unemployed in order to build more battleships which it finds more useful than houses, and to strengthen the army, the last rampart against the social revolution. Manifesting a misplaced pride it has discouraged international goodwill toward France.

"It is more than enough! I solemnly notify those in power that the patience of the people has reached its limit. You, who live in the shadow of egotistical indifference, you rich men who have grown richer through these troubles, you profiteers of the public ruin, do not wait until it is too late to make the necessary sacrifices! Fear the awakening of the people! Fear their anger, august and terrible!"

Frantic applause saluted this peroration. Lebon had to be rescued from the enthusiasm of his admirers, who would have borne him through the streets on their shoulders.

This speech was not without influence on his political future. At this period the deputy was passing through a kind of spiritual crisis. Convicted of shady transactions, not very important in themselves, but nevertheless inexcusable, abandoned by his friends in the Chamber, he discovered once more that softness of heart toward the common people which had carried him into power.

Besides, the elections were approaching. With an unfailing political sense, he discerned the approach of a change, an orientation toward a system of concessions to the laboring classes, sacrificing everything else to the reestablishment of its fortunes.

In the Chamber Lebon demanded the immediate institution of projects which would absorb idle labor, and a policy of financial economies, together with a capital levy. After a neu-



tral speech from the Premier, the ministry was overthrown on a point of order.

The new government was laboriously constructed out of the remains of various ministerial shipwrecks with the addition of a minority of socialists.

## XII

### *Chaos!*

AT ANZIN, Condé and Mons unemployment was not general. Ten thousand descents into the mine were made daily. In spite of the falling roofs, the infiltrations of water, the breakage of iron ladders and trucks, men continued to bring out the coal by the most primitive means and at the price of back-breaking efforts. At the roll call men were missing from every gang. The earth dumbly swallowed these twenty-francs-a-day heroes. Engineers kept the last machines going around them. Pumps struggled with the invading tides, motors soiled with oil and earth worked on.

The strikers encircled those vital points.

At the close of a meeting held at Raismes, a thousand of them pillaged a trainload of food and burned what was left. They headed for the Amaury and Latour pits when they encountered a patrol of cavalry. The greater number of the strikers fled, but a handful made a resistance against the authorities. Around them the others gathered again and tried to liberate the prisoners. Horses wounded by knife-thrusts threw their riders and galloped wildly away.

That evening there was a tumultuous assembly at Condé. The police forces surrounded the Maison du Peuple, the gendarmes penetrated

into the hall with the vociferating crowd. There was a panic and people were crushed at the doors. The gendarmes backed out gradually, and their prudence being mistaken for fear the movement went on. Three thousand strikers marched on Bruay. Their line of march was cut off at several points by barricades and they were finally dispersed on the height of Escautpont.

Leclair, returning from Denain, ran into a procession that grew at every street corner it passed. Repulsed by the 3rd Brigade, the mass flowed back into the suburbs. Adolescents brandished placards, and an acrid dust rose from the beating of their feet. Drawn into the tumultuous crowd, deafened by the racket, he escaped into a little alley leading off to one side.

Leclair observed for an instant a group of young men who were demolishing a trolley and felt a wave of indignation at the sight of so much stupidity and savagery. He was oppressed by the need of doing something. He turned round suddenly, disturbed by the thought that Renée might have gone out, but at Six-Mariannes a company of Blue Guards refused to let him through.

Once more he heard the beat of feet on the ground. At the end of the street a company of infantry armed with rifles was passing. Most of them disappeared behind the customs building, but the rest halted.

DISMOUNTING from his horse an officer consulted a card bearing his orders, and lifting his head perceived Leclair. He asked the shortest road to Prouvy. Very young, with rosy cheeks beneath his gold-laced military cap, the military man was affecting an assured mien, but his gestures betrayed his nervousness. They had ordered him to watch the bridge at Haulchain and prevent the strikers of Trith and Douchy from uniting, but of the bridge there re-

mained nothing but three arches of stone. Twisting his moustache, he confided:

"There are six thousand strikers at Samain with all sorts of criminals and some Belgian scum. They have destroyed the Concession d'Enfer and the offices of the Reconstruction Commission."

"But what in the world do they want?" cried the engineer.

"It's a mess," replied the officer. "There's disorder and anarchy everywhere, and even fighting. Douchy is full of trouble. The Belgians went down into the pits, but the strikers cut the tubing and all the galleries were drowned out. At Bruay they smoked the miners to death in their holes like rats."

Suddenly he stopped, his eyes fixed on a point of the horizon. From the height they could see over part of the city, the multitudes of houses, the streets, the roofs reaching away to the Horizon where the mist mingled with the golden smoke of a far-away fire. At the bottom of the valley the Escaut rolled its flood along the granite quays.

Looking toward Denain, Leclair saw the streets jammed with an ant-like multitude from which mounted a feeble rumor of sound, audible even at this distance. A troop of horsemen had just debouched from the Avenue des Saint-Pères and was trying to hold back the crowd.

Under the light of the sun the little troop of cuirassiers seemed to float in the midst of the crowd like a fragment of silvery foam amid the waves of a torrent. It was dissociated, engulfed, every visible trace of its passage disappeared, while the great flood of human beings undulated through the too-narrow streets.

At the moment while these events were taking place there were other skirmishes at Douai, Mons and Tournai between the armed forces and the jobless in revolt. Martial law was proclaimed in all the basin of the

north, and the administrative powers were turned over to the military authorities. Three squadrons of cavalry, some infantry and gendarmes were sent up to Douai and Valenciennes. Heavy reinforcements of police arrived at Arras in trucks. The Commercy cuirassiers camped at Vicoigne and the prefect of Lille was seen casting frightened glances from the window of his auto as he fled through the suburbs.

Meanwhile, the rioters were in possession of the principal public buildings in Valenciennes. The Cateau bridge, already enfeebled by the Blue Evil was finished off with dynamite.

A number of the inhabitants fled. The peasants remained attached to the earth, in appearance quite indifferent to what was going on. They hid their supplies of wheat and oats in secure places; welcomed the soldiers and liberators and complained to the Reds about the soldiers. They were amazingly uninterested in who won.

A week went by in relative quiet.

One morning a fusillade became audible in the direction of Escaudain. Leclair, from his window, saw a hundred or more men go by, carrying bundles or dragging handcarts from the neighboring farms. The shopkeepers barricaded their store fronts. Windows could be heard closing, doors slamming.

In the afternoon, the miners of Boriange filed by in almost military formation, their guns over their shoulders.

That evening, reassured by the general silence, Leclair ventured out.

THE cankered orb of the moon occasionally showed itself in a sky darkened by masses of cloud. A damp breeze, blew sadly through the alleys. Rats driven from the mines by the progress of the *Siderosis* made animated ink-blots in the streets and disputed the accumu-



lated garbage with the starveling dogs.

As at Sidi-Said Leclair had heard the plaint of the waters in revolt, and the memory of the circumstances which had made him the instrument of a perhaps irreparable disaster imposed itself once more on his mind. But what else could he have done, and of what use were these sterile regrets? The die was cast, the future decided. Like the clockwork movement which sets off an explosion to a mine the Blue Evil was pursuing its regular and irresistible course.

Leclair trembled as he thought of his old friends doomed to inglorious deaths as surely as though he had killed them with his own hands. The thought had become a veritable obsession with him. And then he began to consider how small a part his own feeble actions had played in setting afoot the tornado which was ravaging the whole world, and his scruples appeared absurd. Were not all human enterprises condemned to the same end—and what use was there in tormenting himself?

But this melancholy imagining pursued him. The aspect of these little sleeping streets, with the broken houses cut off sharply against the moonlit sky like Chinese paintings; the wandering dogs, the disorder and abandonment into which everything had sunk, the soldiers silent beside their arms with their helmets reflecting the dancing flames, made upon a scene which seemed to belong to some antique and barbarous past epoch.

The clock on the City Hall struck ten sonorous strokes and a voice could be heard singing a verse of a bawdy song; then silence gripped the city once more.

Hastening his steps, Leclair soon arrived at Croix-Verte, where Lefevre lived in a little house all by himself. The former factory superintendent appeared at an upper window with a lamp in his hand in an-

swer to his knock, then said, astonished:

"What, you here, Leclair? What's the trouble?"

"Nothing. I simply wished to see you. Any news?"

"My word . . . No!"

He showed the engineer into a little office, and pointed to the pile of newspapers on an armchair.

"The latest one is six days old. It seems that the Federation has declared a general strike and the government is out. All the stores are closed and to make things worse, the provision train they expected yesterday hasn't got here yet. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that the strikers had gotten hold of it. But I thought you'd gone away."

"Mme. Morain is not well, and I'm afraid of the effect a long, difficult journey would have on her health. And I'm needed here for a while yet."

"What for?"

"The metal at Aulnoy. I've already mentioned it to you. It represents a fortune at the present price . . ."

"I see," interrupted Lefevre, rather acidly. "You know which side your bread is buttered on. Not like me—after eight years of work in the foundry, being turned out without resources and without a job."

"Come," said Leclair, "let's be frank. I know you have made rather a good thing out of the Bethune mines. I need about fifty thousand francs. . ."

"Why don't you borrow them from Mme. Morain?"

"You doubtless know there is a contest about her husband's will. There are a good many creditors to satisfy, too; the thing will take time to work out in the courts."

"Ah, really! That man Morain! If he had listened to me he never would have been caught in such a pinch. Look at Samuel. The Defence

Committee paid him two million to destroy steel which he later sold back to the same committee. Samuel's got a sense of humor. And Camus with his trucks, and Richard and all the rest. It's fantastic when one comes to think about it. All those cardboard cannons, all those leaky boats, all those rotten rails wished off on the army or the navy or the Reconstruction Commission. They must have passed out no end of cigars. The brigands!"

### XIII

#### *The Rise of the Reds •*

WITH an irritated kick he disturbed the log which was burning in the fireplace and began to stride around the little room. He relit his pipe at the lamp and discharged a couple of preliminary smoke puffs.

"Just the same you can't make me believe that Mme. Morain can't get several thousand francs in an emergency, Ronceraies, alone—"

"True, but it's a question of time. Let me explain. Mme. Morain's biggest creditor is Camus, who wants to seize the stocks of Duro-Fer to satisfy his claim. Morain declared some of them, but not all. Camus, who suspects something of the kind, is going to demand a new expert examination, and this will show up the presence of a concealed stock of steel.

"Well, you know how the new law is about that sort of thing. If we can get rid of Camus, we can get the intact alloys away to a safe place somewhere. The trains are all requisitioned by the army, but I can get a couple of cars. I have spoken to a friend of mine at the central office of the commission, and he can arrange it if he has enough cash for

expenses . . . Naturally, we would recognize your services in a suitable manner."

Lefevre reflected.

"I would have to have the strongest kind of guarantees. The metal stocks at Denain, steel and copper both—they're all shot, you know. But you have the Amaury properties. Why not sell them?"

"Time's not right for it."

Lefevre shrugged.

"Listen to me, Leclair. You were stupid in not unloading those things. Now you're losing money on them with every day that goes by, and you'll never get out. Unload, my boy, unload. Realize everything you got and insist on payment in good solid gold. Then put it into foreign money, precious stones and imperishable products, like rubber, wood, ivory—there are the things that are going to go up. Put your pile in a safe place. The time is coming when you will be able to dictate your own conditions.

"The situation is worse than people think. Capital is going abroad, credit is falling and the cost of living is going up. Look at the inflation; it's increasing like the temperature of a sick man. Famines today and murders tomorrow, that's what we've got to face. And there's always the chance it will get worse.

"As for me, I don't really give a damn. In a few days the Reds will have the forges at Trith and then you can kiss your stocks of Duro-Fer goodbye. If you wish, though—Listen. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy out those stocks myself and give you a good price for them. As for the coal properties, I know a man who is willing to take a chance on any kind of desperate enterprise. Shall I speak to him for you?"

"By all means. I beg you to keep all this confidential."

Leclair swung suddenly round in his chair.

"What? Aren't you alone?"



THE silhouette of a woman had appeared at the curtain of the door for a moment. That catlike motion, that thin face . . . "Why, it's Fanny! What's she doing here? Lefevre, you're an old rascal."

"No, it's not what you think," replied the other, hastily. "She just got here this evening. And in what a state. Her clothes were all in rags and she was half-crazy with exhaustion. Could I throw her into the street? You know, she lived in La Moliere. The village was invaded by Lorraine and Belgian refugees, and the people, who had already put up with a good deal, refused to take them in. You know how those peasants are—all right if you let them alone, but if you don't do what they want, capable of killing you on the spot."

"They turned the refugees out with pitchforks. Things started to pop when the Red Guards established order in their usual fashion. This poor Fanny had the bad luck to fall into their hands and the Reds amused themselves with her. You know what that means. There were more than forty of them. Her shoulders are simply raw where they beat her."

Lefevre swallowed hard. "Bah! Disgusting!" he concluded. "She recognized your voice when you hailed me even before I did, but she didn't want to come in. What is there between you two, anyway?"

"Nothing."

"Ah, if I thought . . . that girl is not too prudish, you know. Shall I call her?"

"Never mind. It's late and I must be getting back," said Leclair, rising.

Lefevre held him back by the arm.

"Are you still thinking of going to Algeria?"

"Possibly."

"My dear fellow, you're making a mistake. These agricultural colonies! The promoters of the idea are back-

ing them only to get rid of the unemployed here. They stay home and split up the dividends. Swindling the human race is an industry that always has an impressive front. In your shoes, I'd wait a while. In any case keep in touch with me, will you? I'm sure there must be some way out for you. You haven't the business experience I have, and I can help you a lot. But don't tell anyone . . . Anyone," he repeated, as he accompanied the engineer to the door.

"What an imbecile," thought Leclair, "Does he really think I'm going to fall for that? And to imagine that among all the people I knew it was he that I counted on the most."

Thinking over the character of Lefevre, contemplating that ferocious egoism so shamelessly displaying itself, that lack of morality almost delightful in its simple candor, he felt a trifle saddened.

Lefevre was right—industry was dead and one must seek some other source of existence. The important thing was not being overcome. As yet he could see his own path only with difficulty, but one idea seemed sensible—return to the earth.

Enterprising men, having decided to build new lives, were quitting the cities by the thousands. The government was encouraging these exoduses, giving enormous grants of land in the colonies for the most insignificant sums. There were rushes toward the more fertile lands like the gold rushes of old.

Special circumstances had already determined the direction of his own choice—Morocco. His desire to embark made all difficulties seem light. He saw himself already the proprietor of a great estate with fortune smiling on his efforts. The only real obstacle was Renée. He had already laid his project before her, but she would never consent to emigrate. Her health, moreover, was not good enough to support the trials of so

rude a type of existence.

THUS Leclair soliloquized on the way to Ronceraies.

When he arrived his decision was fixed. He opened the question at once.

"My dear Renée, I doubt whether you can find in Paris the repose and tranquility you need for the building up of your health."

"Where do you suggest going?"

"To a country where the *Siderosis* is unknown . . . Morocco. The climate is excellent. I have friends there, and you would not be alone."

The properties acquired by Morain some time before his death had depreciated in value. Instead of selling them, he now suggested buying in others at the same cheap price. The exploitation of the tract on a commercial basis would thus become possible. In six months, he felt certain he would be able to renew the old vitality of the enterprise. At least the chance was worth taking. And finally, it was the best means of escaping from the creditors.

She repressed a gesture of irritation. "Oh, let's talk about it some other time."

"It will be too late then. I don't want to frighten you, but I have the impression that the state of affairs here is serious. We must make a decision soon. Denain may fall into the hands of the Reds at any moment."

But Renée was not afraid of them. They were, she thought, only unhappy people who had been driven to desperate measures by their misery. She had been halted in the street by a patrol of Young Guards the day before, among them certain workers from the Morain factory. She had recognized them without difficulty. Their leader, a youth with a timid air, wore a red shirt and a revolver attached to his hip with a string. He had excused himself politely and had suggested that the

patrol see her home. There were so many "bad eggs" roaming the streets these days. She had discovered that Selevine had become one of the most influential chiefs of the communist party.

"Charming!" exclaimed Leclair. "And no doubt you expect him to protect you if these brutes become masters of the city?"

"Why not?"

"That is, until the moment when the soldiers stand him up against a wall and shoot him like a mad dog. My dear Renée, I don't understand your indulgence at all. Communists!"

"Raymond," she said after a moment, "You will go alone. I'm going to Paris."

He protested, but without genuine enthusiasm. Paris was unsafe just now. He would never consent to such a folly. So many bonds united them. They could not separate now. It was, in fact, a matter already decided . . . as soon as he could liquidate this matter of the mines. . .

"If you wish to sell the properties out, I will be glad to make over to you my own holdings."

"I don't really need them. And we will have plenty of time to talk about that. My Renée, I am remembering our first meeting, our walks in the park. I realized then how much alone you were and your sadness went to my heart. We understood each other well then. Now it seems you are escaping me. What have I done to displease you?"

"Nothing. I know you a little better, that's all."

He did not even take the trouble to protest. He had obtained what he wanted, and already he was forming a new plan—buy the adhesion of Vilcor and sell the properties to the Iron Cartel. Certainly he would see to it that Renée did not lose. He was ready to act decently. Once the interests of the young woman were safeguarded, he would feel more at



liberty to get away. Without accounting for the association of ideas he thought of Fanny.

## XIV

### *The Dying Steel*

ON THE fifteenth of January the brigades from Arras, assisted by police forces, attacked the rebellious cities. At Valenciennes the Reds, not having been disturbed for several days, had taken advantage of the respite to fortify their positions, throwing up barricades.

A good estimate put their number at something like a hundred thousand for the whole basin of the North. But the energetic elements were much less numerous and were, in a sense, drowned in a population which, while hostile enough to the defenders of order, was passive and desired quiet more than anything else.

They could all have been brought round by peaceable means. But the government, dominated by a financial oligarchy which had been rendered ferocious by its money losses, and pushed on by the frightened bourgeoisie, wished nothing but a quick and implacable repression of the revolt.

By an ingenious maneuver, General Fremont, commander of the First Corps, had isolated the rebels and cut off their main masses from one another with chains of fortified posts. Those who tried to reunite ran into the military strongholds or encountered a barrage of tanks and armored cars, ready to spit death from every gun. The rebel message bearers were captured and their wireless traffic systematically jammed, causing the greatest confusion in their ranks.

The International Labor Federa-

tion launched an appeal to the proletariat of all countries, and by a narrow majority voted for a general strike, but at the same time expressed its disapproval of the revolutionary form the movement had taken. Three days later all work ceased in Berlin, Munich and western Prussia. The horses were brought up out of the mines, ships were anchored in deserted harbors.

As the workers left their shops at Sheffield, Glasgow and Birmingham, sanguinary brawls between them and the police broke out. Sailors from Scotland, brought in to replace the striking stevedores, mutinied. The order for the interruption of work reached Italy, and the dispossessed factory-owners had to make room for councils of their laborers.

Nevertheless, in France itself, there were disagreements between the syndicalists and the workmen's councils. Minority groups, campaigning actively for their ideas, pushed the combat with vigor and gained new adherents daily. All of them exalted the social revolution by every means and set fire to inflammable imaginations.

The Premier succeeded in overcoming the movement. A former socialist, who flattered himself that he was able to retain the confidence of all the advanced parties, he showed no pity to the strikers once he got into power.

In the Chamber, before a packed house, he described the state of the Capitol, attacked in the most vital parts of its organization. His voice was pathetic as he told how agitators, as stupid as they were criminal, were trying to bring about the fall of his government. In the interest of the country, and since all methods of persuasion had now failed, he would attempt to bring them back to more healthy views and a respect for established institutions and the power of the law by a series of exemplary punishments.

The greater part of the socialists approved his decision, meanwhile making certain reservations by long parliamentary experience.

Other questions were then considered.

Deputy Lebon demanded large votes of funds for the navy, which had been hard hit by the Blue Evil.

With the unanimity which great causes can inspire, with the patriotic clan of the days of the great Revolution, the deputies voted the necessary sacrifices.

**I**N A rainy dawn, the inhabitants of Denain saw a regiment of Blue Guards go by, preceded by their colonel. The helmeted infantry were five thousand strong; then came a black brigade which was to be employed for specially dangerous tasks, as their native ferocity woke under the excitement of combat in a manner beautiful to behold.

The main body of the army arrived before the first barricade, an inextricable tangle of rafters, rails and bricks torn from the neighboring factories. To outflank the obstacle, one would have to pass through a maze of narrow streets; perhaps fight their way through them. The colonel conferred with his officers.

Already an old man, with a timid air and a greying mustache beneath his glasses, he looked more like a professor who had grown bleached over some recondite study than a warrior. In his personal makeup he exhibited a not uncommon paradox; the association of barbaric traditions with cold, speculative intelligence. His eyes, grown dim over scientific books, contemplated the fortification of these misguided men with something like pity, and he wished he had a means of overcoming them without too bloody a conflict.

The action began somewhere in the suburbs. A machinegun rattled,

distantly, and everyone leaped to attention. Lieutenant Dutertre, mounted on his favorite horse, came up at a gallop.

"Mon colonel, I have had three men killed and Blanchette's knee has been grazed by a bullet. Look how it bleeds. The brutes! They told us their arms were unusable. Shall we attack?"

"Wait a minute . . . Lieutenant, you know your blacks. Not too much energy, now."

"Oh, mon colonel, they are all as gentle as lambs."

"Well, you understand what we are after. Prisoners, not barbarity. And above all, no souvenirs. After all, they are Frenchmen."

"Those Frenchmen over there are our worst enemies."

At this moment a messenger arrived from Chalons for the colonel. Reading over the note he brought, the officer turned pale and then gave several rapid orders. The lieutenant had an amused light in his blue eyes.

"Well, we're really going to begin. Ah, you bums over there! Mon colonel, you're going to see something really good."

Down the empty street, pushed by the hands of men, advanced a strange engine of war. All metal had been rigorously eliminated from its construction. Armored in fibrecement, with reservoirs of compressed air, topped with a moving tube, one would have said it was some prehistoric monster. The idea of the invention, which was altogether new, was due to General Fremont, a humanitarian who dreamed of bringing about world peace by fear, through augmenting the means of destruction, to such a point that men would no longer fight.

The opportunity for trying out this new type of tank, designed for use against enemies from beyond the borders, was too tempting to be missed, and it had been hastily



rushed through to completion. The colonel chewed the ends of his moustache and gazed at the monster with disapproval. He liked fine horses, cannons, sabres. He was a man of tradition.

"Tell me, lieutenant, this gas, no . . . ? You're sure . . . ? It isn't deadly?"

The other gave an imperceptible shrug. "What an idea?" Aloud he said, "Mon colonel, the shells are filled with chlorosedemil."

"What?"

"Chloro—se—demil; narcotic vapors. You will see. They'll drop off to sleep like babies. No pain."

THERE was a subdued whistling.

The fibrite globe fell a little short, burst softly like an egg, permitting the escape of a smoke whose curls rolled lazily along the ground. Grenades that raised fountains of gravel and dust around the tank began to burst, and the machine profited by the occasion to approach a little nearer. An odor of chlorine reached the colonel's nostrils. The soldiers could be heard coughing. In spite of the absence of wind the yellowish gas was flowing back in their direction and through a gap in the artificial fog the top of the barricade became visible. The lieutenant returned at a gallop.

"What's happening?"

"The dirty rats! They have installed a machine. I don't know what it is, a pump, a wind machine or something, that drives the gas backwards. My men are blinded and spitting blood. But how did they do it? Mine ventilators, I suppose. Listen, you can hear the motors . . . It's incredible. We must — What's that?"

The colonel lifted his glasses and looked.

"They've stopped firing. Something's happening."

With a cry, a group of the rebels had run from behind the coal pile to

seek cover elsewhere. Those in the open flattened themselves to the ground beside guns that had rotted to uselessness, overwhelmed at the prospect of being without defence. Their comrades tried to rally, in spite of bleeding hands and faces scorched by bursting guns, but every shot directed toward the troops was only another weapon against themselves.

Their chief cried out, "Fight on!" —but what could they fight with? Teeth and nails? The grenades were bursting among them and they had no reply. The infantry was advancing in front, others were already shooting them down from the rear of the barricades. They were without defence, facing death.

On a neighboring roof a machine-gun blew up in a burst of flame, and something like a sack of meal rolled down the tiles and crashed to the ground. Out of the shadows surged a face, crying with the torment of the tortured body that belonged to it. The insurgents' last arms betrayed them.

Their courage gave way. All but a little desperate group abandoned their position and fled by any route they could find. The rout was complete.

And now the ardor of battle grew strong in the soldiers. The dragoons rode down the rebels in the factory yards and streets, sabering the flying without pity. The thick smoke which had enveloped the field of action began to lift and the wounded were to be seen among the broken stones and the iron debris around the barricade.

There remained in the factory itself a thousand or more men. These surrendered at the first summons.

Meanwhile the 2nd squadron was carrying the barricades at Est by assault. After a desperate struggle at Herin, they got across the Escaut and surrounded the City Hall, where the Reds shot, sang and shouted like

so many maniacs. The black troops fired two volleys and then charged up the stairs. They came down again a little later, laughing and with scarlet spots on their brown hands.

The two leaders of the insurrection perished in this engagement. Someone had set fire to the old building and it was soon destroyed with its dead.

The soldiers returned slowly in little groups, panting and covered with perspiration. After the exaltation of the combat an indefinable discomfort overwhelmed them. Far away, cries could be heard from the Saint Roch quarter, where the Third Hussars had surrounded a group. The vanquished had poured petrol over everything before taking to flight and a nauseating smoke rolled over the whole neighborhood.

The horrors of fratricidal war struck home to these tired men.

The rain had stopped. Little pools of water reflected the gray calm sky. The inhabitants began to stick heads out of windows, exhibiting frightened eyes in faces haggard with insomnia. Some of them even came out to insult the prisoners being led away to the fortress of Malplaquet. Surrounded by gendarmes, they marched along in silence in clothes wet through by the rain.

**A**LREADY soldiers from the Engineers' Corps were reestablishing the means of communication, clearing up the railroads and streets. A poster announced to the population that plentiful provisions would soon be at hand. While waiting for their arrival, everyone was urged to restrain their appetite as far as possible. Court martials were established for the trial of all grave crimes such as armed rebellion and pillaging; the syndicates and workmen's councils were dissolved and public meetings were forbidden.

Government engineers everywhere were notified that they were subject

to the orders of the military authorities, and the state of siege declared for the basin of the North included the requisitioning of all machines and buildings necessary for the public use. An economic commission, furnished with dictatorial powers opened sittings at Lille. The inhabitants were exhorted to be patient, to be calm and to work.

Under the orders of the Procurer-General suspicious places were searched and a good many arrests were made, but without much success so far as suppressing extremist agitation went. The repressive measures only seemed to fill the ranks of the associations with new members. After the breakup of the great organizations new parties were born on all sides out of the confusion of ideas—the Vigilantes, the Populists, the Federalists, the Volunteers of Order, a hundred factions that asserted their interests and promoted antagonistic ambitions.

The Vigilantes, composed of the socialists who disapproved of revolutionary methods and who were determined to reestablish order and security by any possible means, grew in number from day to day. United by oaths, they practiced a rude form of self-discipline and inculcated the more Spartan virtues; wore a uniform of a cut at once romantic and military and adopted the fasces and axe of the Roman lictors as their insignia. The integrity of their principles did not permit them to make compromises. They reproached the head of the government with venality, unskillfulness and softness, and this point of view gave them the support of the National Militia, to which they expected some day to oppose the forces of the Red syndicates.

At Amiens, the Vigilantes refused to turn over to the authorities deserters from the army who had taken refuge in their ranks. Similar clashes took place at Nancy, while



at Brest, Marseilles and Toulon, they openly sympathized with the mutinying sailors. The whole country was filled with the turmoil of groups striving desperately for contradictory purposes. Leaders, unheard-of before, assembled partisans, threw some province or city into disorder, and then as suddenly disappeared. Irregular bands gathered to disperse the first attack and then regather again. An incessant and bitter mutual hostility divided all these little groupings from each other. The human mind was expressing its incoherence amid a chaos of ideas. Wild agitations of obscure origin swept through the country amid a universal uprising of the most primitive instincts, and panic sent hordes flying from terrors they could not name.

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## XV

### *Flight!*

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**R**ENÉE, who had been dozing, opened astonished eyes.

The carriage was getting away from the laboring district now and the wheels were bumping over pieces of wood and dislocated rails. Puddles of water, covered with a scum of coal-dust, were stagnating in the streets where the barricades, only half removed, still exhibited their rafters and sections of barbed wire. No human movement animated the houses behind their closed blinds.

Shivering in the damp cold, she burrowed deeper into her furs and steadied her tired head on her hand. Her eyelids, heavy with a night of wakefulness, closed insensibly. She saw Leclair again, not living, but as she had recognized him among the corpses of the day before. His face was twisted with his last agony, his hair matted with blood, his eyelids

drawn back from glassy eyes. The broken roof of the hospital had let through a shaft of light which struck these sightless faces, drab-colored like cinder or wood.

A medical officer told her how they had found the body at Aulnoy where the stocks of steel were piled after the Reds had been sacking the place. On the forehead was the mark of a blow from some heavy instrument and the hand was still tightened around the grip of a revolver. The voice of the medical officer had been slow and quiet. It seemed somehow far away, unreal, and without any relation to her own existence. She tried to imagine the last drama, but the features of her late friend dissolved in the fog of the past.

A sensation of disgust mingled with her pity as she realized it was easier for her to picture that murdered body, delivered over to the horrors of decay, than to recall how Leclair had looked full of youth and life. She accused herself of lack of feeling and cursed her own detestable imagination. Poor Raymond, who had begged her to go away with him, fearing these revolutionary struggles with good reason. He had predicted an ignominious death for Selevine, and that death had struck down Leclair himself, while the Russian, who had passed through a thousand violences was sitting there beside her, safe and sound. It seemed to Renée like a treason against divine justice.

"I will never be able to understand," thought Renée, searching her mind for the reasons that had led her to defend Selevine to the point of imperilling her own security.

He had come by night to hide in the park around her house, wounded and pursued. The shriek of a whistle had awakened him with a jerk from a fitful rest. One could hear the sound of the water and faraway clamors. The river was piling the

remnants of bridges against its banks, and black soldiers were exploring the neighborhood with torches held at arm's length. Their clubs fell dully on the heads of pillagers and incendiaries. Selevine was there in the shadow, his head bare, his clothes torn, trembling with the reaction from the struggle.

The rage of defeat convulsed his features. Most of his comrades had been killed in the attack on the barricades, others had been caught later. How he had escaped, he himself did not know. He was breathing heavily, like an animal, repeating "The brutes, the atrocious brutes," and filled with a mad desire to kill, kill, kill.

But she had drawn him to her, had enveloped him in loving arms, herself shivering, and had breathed out words of supplication and entreaty. "Rest here . . . Don't abandon me . . . I'm alone, I'm afraid." And she had made him hide himself, recovering enough of her strength to lie to the searchers and send them off in another direction.

Nevertheless she despised him a little for having given in to her, for having so easily accepted this precipitate flight. Her voice was aggressive as she said:

"It was your Red Guards who assassinated Raymond, and not vulgar bandits as you tried to make me believe. I am sure of it now. Only your extremists would have wanted to steal arms and tools."

Selevine, who had not said three words since the previous day, made a gesture, but did not unclench his teeth.

"You might at least answer when I speak to you."

"My dear Renée, I don't understand the reason for these reproaches."

"I'm not reproaching you with anything," she said with angry energy.

They had to stop to let a convoy of prisoners go by. Hands chained together, they seemed a troop of beasts on the way to the slaughterhouse. She looked at Selevine's face without being able to see a trace of any emotion at all imprinted there. The lamentable procession disappeared around a turn in the road.

THE carriage entered the suburban district which surrounded Escaudin with a black fringe dotted with gardens. The houses began to space out and give way to stony fields, bordered with the ruins of factories between their double piles of coal and clinkers.

Passersby were rare at first, but beyond Aniche they began to encounter carriages and then refugees with their bundles over their shoulders; miners on their way to the Maubeuge district in search of work; women pulling badly-clothed children behind them, peasants from Vicoigne and Bruillé whom the famine had driven from their holes like wolves in winter, Belgian and Lorraine steelworkers, Italians from the sugar-refineries, with oily skins under their masses of black hair.

Around them extended a blackened and scarred countryside, marked everywhere with shining pools of water. The rain struck the back of the carriage obliquely. The horse jerked and stumbled at intervals. A truck containing a dozen soldiers splashed them with mud as it passed, and was presently followed by others, carrying up loads of provisions or tools, each accompanied by its armed escort. Then came a series of odd vehicles collected from everywhere and loaded with domestic objects; rustics driving their cows and horses and bicyclists covered with mud, bent double over their handle-bars.

A patrol of the Militia of Order went by, their guns over their shoulders, their profiles accentuated like



cameos by the sweeping berets they wore. A group of men belonging to no recognized formation, mercenaries, deserters from the army, pillagers of factories, who showed through the holes in their ragged garments bodies corroded by contact with the rotten iron.

Further on a stalled horse-truck was holding up traffic. Wrapped in his sheepskin coat, an old man was trying to make his fallen horse rise. The crowd simply collected around the obstacle. With stupid obstinacy the old peasant continued to beat the animal with the handle of his whip. Jokers offered ridiculous advice; a few well-placed bombs would reanimate the lazy animal, they said. One of them patted the carter on the shoulder.

"What have you got in your sacks? Are you deaf, grandpa? What—plaster. Are you going to build a house?" Laughter. The man looked around with a frightened air, his simple face running with perspiration. A drop of kindness seemed to filter into the hearts of the crowd. Willing hands began to tug at the wheels, shoulders gave friendly pushes to the cart. It was partly unloaded. But when one of the sacks leaked clean white flour, oil was poured on the flames of the mob's resentment. Selevine made an attempt to intervene, but mouths vomited obscene jokes and curses at him.

Renée was the object of glances that made her burrow down in the furthest corner of the carriage.

One of the vagabonds leaped on the step of the vehicle, gripping the handles. With a slash of his whip, Selevine made him release his hold, then flogged the horse into rapid movement. A shower of stones and curses accompanied their flight.

Selevine looked at Renée's frightened face.

"Don't be upset by a little thing like that," he said. "There are plenty

of such incidents."

"You're very reassuring."

"Until the communists come into power and reestablish order. But people have to live."

"To live," thought Renée. "What's the use of it? Where can one find the strength necessary to carry on an unattractive existence in which the weak are everywhere trampled on?" She felt a sudden need of rest. "Only to isolate oneself in some secure retreat where one would never hear the Blue Evil mentioned again: to forget oneself—are those unrealizable desires?"

A pleasant remembrance floated into the field of her thoughts. She saw herself once again a young girl in the Scotch city where she had been educated. The stones of the boarding house were covered with ivy and wisteria whose leaves shivered in the sea-breeze. A delicate light bathed the neighboring hillsides. Young men played, bare-headed, in the green countryside and among the laughing gardens. One of them had kissed her on the lips one day. How sweet life had seemed then.

A feeling of discouragement filled her at the thought of remaining for the rest of her life without a real friend in the world, and a murmur of loneliness escaped from her lips.

"I'm all alone."

SOME tender emotion woke in Selevine. He was suddenly aware of an unformulated hope. His mouth became dry and an artery beat in his temple. As though in a dream he heard the young woman say:

"Why is it always necessary to struggle against the evil deeds of men? Vanquished by destiny, succumbing to all the evils, they will find strength enough to hate. There are times when I find myself frightened by this inexplicable world."

"Just the same," said Selevine, "they are no more than our unhappy

brothers." His voice was a trifle hoarse.

"Here's Soumain," he remarked a few minutes later. "In half an hour we'll be at Campeau."

A monotony of roofs appeared in the distance behind a screen of trees. The sky grew clearer above the red tiles.

Children who were playing in a brook stopped to inspect the newcomers. A soldier bearing the insignia of the Council on his tunic emerged from a guardhouse and verified their papers.

The horse seemed at the end of his strength. Selevine leaped out to examine his feet; two of the shoes were broken. Perplexed, he stopped at a farm whose walls reached to the roadside through a screen of trees. The owner of the place came down to meet them, quieting his dog. After having heard Selevine's explanation of their plight, he said it would be impossible to make repairs anywhere near. There did not remain a usable horseshoe for ten miles around.

Having made this declaration, the good man insisted that the young lady stop and rest a little. He cut a loaf of bread and put some milk and butter on the table. Selevine offered to let him keep the horse and carriage until they came back to call for it, but Renée resolved to get rid of them at all costs, accepted the absurd price the peasant offered without demur.

Her companion urged her to hurry on. Three miles still separated them from Montigny and time was passing. Their host told them of a short cut that would take them there quickly.

The countryside was surprisingly calm. Leaving the village they traversed little roads through fields that had become like sponges. The land, gorged with rain, was damp under the rotten vegetation and smelled faintly of fever. A marsh reflected the vague color of the sky and the

confused forms of the clouds. Bodies of various sorts rotted in holes beneath a covering of flies. Renée gave a little cry at seeing among the weeds where it had lain concealed until they passed close, a body with bare feet pointing at the road. A little, furtive animal fled as they approached.

When they reached Montigny night had already begun to fall. This mining city had recently been the scene of violent riots between the laborers and the troops. The Blue Evil had ravaged everything.

In the evening mist, which drowned the whole region, not a single light was burning; only the reflection of some fire appeared on the horizon behind the leprous houses. Like cyclopean towers, the forges of Bruillé lifted above the black mass of the buildings, the huge tubes that only yesterday had been crowned with flame now forever silenced.

Near the railroad station a patrol of dragoons were warming themselves around a fire. A resigned multitude pressed along the platforms and overflowed onto rails reddened by two weeks of disuse. Further on several pieces of railroad equipment were visible; a signal tower, a few electrical pylons with trailing wires, and the white globes of lamps.

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## XVI

### *Selevine Dreams*

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THEY found a place on a bench. Near them peasants, ensconced among their bags or wrapped in their blankets, were slumbering. Several hours went by. A sense of complete exhaustion overwhelmed the travelers.

Some children approached Mme. Morain. They did not dare to extend their hands but held themselves in a



tense readiness for anything she might give them, like little animals. When she tossed them a few sous, they fled, disputing among themselves.

Toward six o'clock a sanitary train going to Lille was announced. A little later the locomotive came smoking into the station. At once all the travelers precipitated themselves onto it. The guards did not even try to keep them back. The train was covered with them—on the roofs, along the runways and on the bumpers.

"Back, keep back!" called voices, unavailing.

The gendarmes finally succeeded in clearing the track in front of the train and it left.

Selevine inquired about an inn where they might be able to spend the night. Renée remained silent, walking with difficulty, her eyelashes falling onto her pale cheeks, infinitely tired.

The wind tossed the edge of her scarf. The night smelled wild, as though burned with the distant fires. Somewhere a sign-board, half loosened, swung creaking to and fro. In the sky the clouds flew rapidly past.

A sense of irreparable disaster enveloped the young woman. The weight of a sorrow she had not sensed before seemed to fall on her shoulders. In the space of an instant a sudden vertigo transformed the appearance of the whole world to that of a nightmare already experienced. Between her and the outer world a reminiscence seemed to have been interposed like an impalpable screen, and everything she saw was half-hidden and inconsistent.

She staggered. Selevine gripped her by the arm and asked:

"You are tired, Renée?"

She responded without being aware of what she was saying:

"No, Raymond. Oh, pardon . . ." The reality strangled her while the other part of her mind still followed

the trail of some unattainable vision. The narrow street surged before her open eyes. Nothing broke the silence. Selevine halted before an inn and allowed the remains of an iron door-knocker to fall against the door. The wood trembled slightly and an old woman, her face angry beneath her bonnet, came to open for them. They went into a room where there was an odor of dried apples. The old woman busied herself in the kitchen, threw a few sticks of wood into the fireplace, and finally appeared with a rustic supper, of which they could not eat a mouthful.

Selevine asked for hot tea and eau-de-vie. He did not ordinarily care for strong drinks, but this evening, thoroughly tired, he poured out several draughts that coursed through his veins to fill him with an agreeable warmth. Lighting his pipe, he hid himself in a cloud of smoke.

The candle made shadows dance along the walls and among the furniture; Selevine meditated in a confused manner on the fugitive pictures of the last days—his precipitate flight, the hordes of emigrants, the people attacked by the Blue Evil in its human manifestation, the prisoners, a mother tearlessly watching her sick child, little larval human beings begging for something to eat, with heads enormously out of proportion, their every appearance painful.

SELEVINE wondered what had happened to him. Of what curious neurosis had he become the victim. He felt barbarous instincts stir in the depths of his mind.

He shivered, passed a hand across his forehead and sighed. With eyes that had become a trifle haggard he turned toward Renée.

"Some days ago I was working in a suburb of Valenciennes. Nearly all the houses were deserted. One of them attracted my attention, however. The door swung to and fro in

the wind and higher up à window clung to a dirty rag of curtain by means of a piece of broken glass. I went in and almost stumbled across the corpse of a little girl."

Obsessed by another drama, Renée said:

"It was your Red Guards who murdered Raymond. The poor man whose courage your friends could never pardon. Killed by some scoundrel."

"All social overturns bring some ignoble characters up from the depths. They are the dregs deposited by centuries of ignorance and misery, now slowly rising to the surface of society. The most noble enterprises are touched in this way."

But Renée continued with irritation:

"All that is nothing but the phrases of a doctrinaire. I only know one thing—if you and others like you did not provoke disorders, Raymond would still be alive. It's very little consolation to know that the murderers are not inscribed on the rolls of the communist party. Bandits, revolutionaries, pillagers are easily mixed up, and separating them out is too much of a job for me."

And she added:

"Poor Raymond! Before anyone else thought of it, he understood the magnitude of the peril of the Blue Evil and the necessity of abandoning the factory . . . if we had only followed his advice. Ah, he knew what was behind those nice words of yours: 'justice and liberty'! He was no cloudy idealist. He knew your friends."

"Too well," said the Russian, in a stifled voice, "in some cases . . . Laval, for example."

"What are you daring to insinuate?" demanded Renée. "It's shameful of you! What did your precious Laval mean to Raymond, I ask you? When I think that his murderers are still unpunished! Oh! I could take terrible reprisals. I want revenge."

"The communists deported, the

unemployed without food or lodging, more than five thousand workers assassinated, isn't that enough for you? Do you know that in the section of which I was a member not one man escaped death?"

"Except you. My congratulations! There is nothing for you to do now but enjoy your well-earned rest and receive deputations. The world is indulgent toward anarchists who repent."

"Your sarcasms hurt me, Renée. No, none of us can ever take any repose or enjoy the most simple pleasures of life. We are excluded from the rights of humanity. As for me, my work is not yet finished. We were beaten, but it is nothing. Here where it was born, the movement of liberation will grow and ultimately extend across the whole world."

"Then the lesson you got wasn't enough for you! And you are going to continue on the track of I don't know what dream, to make new dupes to prepare for new massacres. You haven't the slightest pity for the unhappy people you draw into these futile adventures. What do you expect? Look out. You won't have the chance to get away when things go wrong again as you did this time."

Selevine's face became flushed.

"This is an unexpected reproach. You saved my life. Don't make me regret it."

The young woman's anger did not cool.

"All the same you have a queer method of showing your appreciation for the hospitality of the country where you have found asylum and protection."

"I could answer you on that point in a good many ways. But what's the use? Wait, hear me—there are necessary murders, just as there are sick men who can be cured only by cutting away portions of their bodies. What does a little suffering matter if it's a condition of success? A few weeks ago you approved my



views. What has changed you?"

"You ask? What kind of a man are you?"

She looked him full in the face.

"Selevine, I am going to put one question to you and I want an answer without any evasions. Are you sincere?"

"What?"

"Yes. Do you really believe you are working for the good of humanity in destroying the organization of society? Are you a revolutionist by conviction?—or by dilettantism?"

"But—"

"Answer me."

"Truly . . . I don't know."

"Oh!"

"I swear that I would be ready to sacrifice my life for my ideals. Hear me, Renée, when a man once finds his life work, he must follow his course blindly without futile returns to examine himself. Doubt—the evil of doubt, agonizes our best moments."

HE REMAINED silent for a moment and then began again: "I embroiled myself in the combat, and yet if you knew how far I really am from all . . ."

He trailed off, seeming to be absorbed in his thoughts, then lifted his head and looked at Renée with concentrated attention.

A certain sickly grace had lighted up her features; her skin showed the fine tracery of the veins at her temples, her neck seemed to bend beneath the weight of the necklace that encircled it.

This feebleness left him without anything to say. He kissed her suddenly on the forehead, the eyebrows, but she repulsed him gently. Her eyes filled with tears.

His conscience suddenly disappearing he strained her lissome body to him, overcame her feeble resistance, and their lips met in a kiss wet with tears, and the kiss stirred Selevine to the depths of his being. But he

felt she was far from him, drawn in on herself, inert. Then with an effort of his whole will power he let her go and went out into the night that would cover his sadness, filled with emotions he had never before experienced.

. . . Hardly had he gone to bed when, in contradiction to his usual habit he fell asleep at once. His mind entered on the borders of an incoherent nightmare, then, as though he could change the course of things at will, he found himself walking along a solitary road. Walls across which roses were growing, attracted his attention. Sometimes an iron grill permitted one to see gardens and bars of light flecked the silent forms of trees which extended their branches out toward a distant sea. Mists filled a low valley, there were olive trees along the edge of a brook, and a chimney was smoking near a road which the winter sun had paved with pale gold. The countryside was familiar to him, but the dream threw its air of unreality across everything.

As it was Sunday, people were walking about the streets and Selevine recognized some of them; a woman in mourning, carrying a cat in her arms; an acidulous old man, a chesty youth, a too-nervous child, which moved its head constantly and wrung its hands from time to time. He walked slowly wondering about their illnesses, warming himself in the rays of the declining sun.

A little old man came into the park, carrying a fiddle. His white beard covered his chest. He stopped, lifted his head and passed his bow across the strings. Attracted by the cry of the strings, the passersby approached noiselessly. The old man leaned on his cane, the woman with the cat wept, the nervous child fixed its magnetic eyes on space.

Half-forgotten remembrances and old phantoms surged into his consciousness with the air of things which are not and could not have

existed. There was the light in the house, loved ones who had died, his unhappy youth, his wasted life. Oh, my brothers, thought Selevine, contemplating their destiny and his own.

He was suddenly aware of their troubles, the days they had spent each bearing its load of lost opportunities and pains without result; and their true faces appeared to him across their ephemeral physical masks; people too tired, overcome by life, afraid of death. He felt the irony of their existences and burdens so much like his own.

Nevertheless something about these people, now fixed in attitudes of abnormal and grotesque desolation, made him uneasy.

The shadows in the park lengthened. A dead leaf turned and fell. The waxen skin, the salient bones—what was it in the twilight gloom? Under the shadow of Time they stood angular and stiff, they dreamed of things obscure, devastating smiles on their painted wooden faces.

"It isn't possible," said Selevine to himself, perplexed, held back by fear from seeing what he was certain he would see, approaching one of the incredible mannequins till it fell to the ground at his touch and he fumbled in its breast and stomach to draw forth hands full of straw and cotton, as he laughed, laughed softly at having been taken in by appearances and believing that this could be true.

Waking with a jerk, Selevine recalled his dream. The dawn was rising. A swallow went by under the milky way, crying its little cry. And like an unhappy infant he burst into tears over his own unhappiness.

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## XVII

### *In Paris*

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THE next morning Selevine went out to get information about the probable arrival of a train. He

walked rapidly, brandishing his cudgel. His nostrils dilated with the odor of day, the wind blew across the cracking ruins of the houses and bent the rustling young poplars in a manner somehow cheerful.

Emerging from the railroad station he ran into Lefevre, who seemed in a hurry and much annoyed. When Selevine had answered a couple of questions, he repeated for the second time, as though incredulous:

"Then Mme. Morain is with *you*?"

His eyes hardly concealed a heavy irony. Selevine was tempted to smash his fist into the sneering face.

"Mme. Morain is on her way to her aunt's home in Paris,"

"It's a bit odd all the same."

"What?" demanded Selevine sharply.

"Our meeting here, this coincidence."

He had come on from Peruwelz in a four-seater car. But the motor which had functioned thus far through some miracle of the *Siderosis*, refused to carry him any further.

Selevine demanded imperiously that Lefevre take Mme. Morain and himself on to Paris. The ex-factory superintendent, though not at all willing to oblige the Russian, whom he had always detested, finally yielded to the importunities of his interlocutor. With a bad grace, he took him to the end of the town, where the car had been garaged in the barn of a little farm. Selevine examined the motor, found the cause of the trouble and fixed it after a fashion with the aid of what implements they could find.

At the Hotel des Negociants they found Mme. Morain already wrapped in her coat. She made a gesture which Selevine had not time to interpret, for two gendarmes, rising suddenly out of the dark at the back of the room, demanded to see the papers of the travelers. Renée remained motionless, hardly daring



to breathe, but Selevine, with a smile exhibited papers that had been carefully forged, and the inquisitors excused themselves and left.

Lefevre seated himself at the table and terrorized the servant by the demands of an appetite sharpened by half a day of fasting.

"I'm going on to Nice," he explained. "The southern part of France has suffered little. You can get plenty to eat there when you're hungry, but you have to pay the price for it. But these cities here are full of emigrants without counting the foreigners who are around temporarily, taking advantage of the exchange to live on nothing."

He turned toward Renée.

"I tried hard to get Raymond to leave Denain as much as three months ago. I can still see him as he last showed up at my house, when he tried to get me to take on some queer business deal in which part of your holdings were involved. I told him I would do what I could for him. He mentioned you, too, madame, and I would be very happy if my small knowledge of financial affairs could be of any use to you. You may dispose of me as you would of our late friend."

And as the young woman was thanking him he added:

"Friends were made to help one another in a pinch."

Speaking of Leclair, he referred to the arrest of Laval, and remarked that he attached no real importance to rumors.

"Leclair met Fanny at my house and they saw each other after that—just how frequently I don't know. She had seen her former lover, and the two men hated each other. It seems that Laval wanted to get hold of the stocks at Aulney and Fanny intervened in favor of Leclair.

"Or against him."

"You know how it is with women—"

"Yes, I know," said Selevine in a

cutting voice. "Fanny was at your house for a while wasn't she? And she knew about the existence and whereabouts of the stocks of Duro-Fer."

"It's possible," said Lefevre, avoiding the Russian's glance, and pulling out his watch, he added:

"I think it's time we were starting"

ALL THREE climbed into the car and Lefevre took the wheel. When they got outside the city he speeded up. A road opened its flying lines before them. The fields on either side flowed past monotonously, patched here and there with groups of beech or apple trees. Sliding through the clouds, a ray of sunlight made the roofs of Douchy glow around the clock-tower. They found the streets empty, the houses abandoned and the only inn boarded up.

The auto went on. They passed through Arras at nine o'clock in the evening. As they drew nearer to Paris, they began to encounter barred-off bridges that forced them into a series of fantastic detours. A locomotive which had rolled down an embankment barred the road at one place. Fences torn down, paving torn up, broken glass in the middle of the streets, an indescribable disorder everywhere, bore mute witness to the popular fury during the preceding week.

From Mount Valerien, a searchlight lost in the shadows of falling day, threw its shaft of light across the fog above the city and lighted up the vapor like a halo.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mme. Lafont was extremely fond of her niece, Renée. After the death of M. Morain, she had written that she would accomplish even the impossible to facilitate Renée's existence if the latter came to live with her. But every day events were more

discouraging to her kind heart. Her little fortune gradually melted; her friends disappeared. This isolation in a great city made the situation particularly painful for her. She had a peculiarly expansive character and she suffered from having no one to confide in but Renée or Selevine. The latter's distracted air froze her justest complaints on her lips. The Russian who visited the house assiduously, was far from being a welcome visitor. Mme. Lafont was not in ignorance of his part in the communist troubles, and she considered him a compromising visitor; perhaps a man actually wanted by the police. Nevertheless, his respectful attentions to Renée, the services which he was forever performing for her, modified this resentment slightly.

Selevine had kept up cordial relations with Barrois, and had persuaded the latter to care for Mme. Morain's interests at Denain. As chief engineer of the Reconstruction Committee, this help could be invaluable.

After a long period during which Barrois gave no sign of life, he arrived at the dwelling of the two women one day. He had not forgotten his old friends, but he had his duties and they left him little leisure. He seemed uneasy, his face was drawn; quite different from what Renée had known of him. His job was the reorganization of means of communication and the provision of food-supplies in the devastated regions. With regard to what he was doing at that particular moment, he was vague.

Mme. Lafont trotted out her usual list of complaints, but the engineer hardly heard her.

A single subject occupied all his thoughts—the malady of metal. His life had become a series of days of back-breaking toil and nights without sleep. Driven at frantic speed during the day, his nervous

machine kept up its work at night, and when he tried to shut his eyes for a moment of repose, he could see nothing but the disordered cities, the ruined countryside, burned and rotting buildings.

"We have organized a trucking service," he recounted, "for the whole northern basin and the Department du Pas de Calais, right down to the Belgian border. That is, from the head of the railroads where there are a few locomotives still moving on Duro-Fer rails. From Luxembourg on, all the locomotives are under lead armor.

"Every day we make new maps of the danger zone, and the disease spreads wider with our markings of Chinese ink. In the whole region from Anzin to Creusot there is a provision shortage in spite of all we can do. One train at Roubaix was literally submerged by famished bands and we finally had to drive them off with jets of steam. Thousands of abandoned children are wandering about in the fields. The hospitals are swamped and they no longer make any effort to count the dead. Organisms enfeebled by hunger are peculiarly subject to the human *Siderosis*."

Mme. Lafont looked up.

"Isn't there any remedy?"

"None. Preventive measures are the only things that are any use."

"I was going to ask your advice. It's about Renée. You are in connection with Graham and the big men of the Reconstruction. You ought to be able to find some buyer for the Madeleine mine."

Barrois felt an interior shiver. He knew that the mine was hopelessly lost, but Mme. Lafont's air was so supplicating that he promised to aid in the impossible project of its sale.

LESS than a week later he returned with a friend, a rather puffy fat man named Colson, a meat packer who had realized an amazing



fortune by selling slightly damaged stores of beef. This important personage had the air of distinction and frankness which distinguished most of his class. Renée's aristocratic mien interested him from their first meeting, and while he was busily scraping his nails with his pen-knife he cast speculative glances at her, estimating her cash value. He liked her; was disposed to set a most generous figure for her, in view of the decline in feminine values in comparison with those of edible meat, and ended by offering his protection in exchange for certain small favors. But they were refused him, and a project in which sentiment and interest could have been combined in the proportions recognized by the usages of polite society perished. With it went the last hopes of Mme. Lafont.

That lady held Selevine responsible for the check, although it is difficult to see where he was to blame. The attitude of Renée seemed to justify that of her aunt. She avoided seeing the Russian alone, exhibited a bored air when he called, and discouraged his every attempt at conversation by her silences. Sometimes, without any apparent reason for it, the Russian saw tears in her eyes. His visits became less frequent.

He had changed, too. His gestures were less lively. He trod the streets with bowed shoulders and uncertain steps and when he lifted his face his appearance surprised those who had known him.

With indifference, he had contemplated the spectacle of the Socialists, at first beaten, coming into power and persecuting their enemies in turn. Men he had venerated broke their most solemn promises, forgot all friendships and honor and went through the old familiar gestures of those they had been crying out against. Among all parties self-interest, envy and cowardice appeared

without a single redeeming virtue.

But Selevine had lost his faculty of being indignant over such things. A profound lassitude had submerged his qualities of hate and love. The generous ideals for which he had been willing to sacrifice his life in the past so full of hopes and struggles, had now become a melancholy vision without warmth. His only comfort was that he felt able to see the truth without any haze of illusion, and his misanthropy had acquired an almost metaphysical character.

One of his friends, the painter Keller, hoping that diversions would draw him from this moodiness, had introduced him into a cosmopolitan artistic circle. The correct Bohemians of this group, always washed and shaved, made desperate efforts to bring originality into their lives, but their dilettantism had a character that was hardly innocent. They had a definite bent toward the more morose forms of vice.

Morphine and cocaine were freely used to overcome the pains caused by the radioactive metals and the use of these drugs had spread with great rapidity. Overcome by his incurable boredom, his will-power defunct, Selevine had been unable to resist the example. Already the influence of the drugs was showing in him. He became irritable without reason, slept little. He, who had always preferred solitude, was now pleased only by the company of vulgar crowds, seeking out by preference the company of those who made up the night-life of the dying city—bored men and public women.

## XVIII

### *A World Without Iron*

THE murmur of the crowd did not reach the ears of Mme. Renée Morain, who had become a hermit

in her own room, stretched out on a chaise-longue in the position which gave the least pain to her unhappy body. In the last two months there had been a rapid advance in the *Siderosis* which was striking her down.

The strength of the young woman had declined, a feeling of cold that kept her huddled before a fire grew upon her daily, and her sleep was troubled with nightmares. In this overpopulated, undernourished city, now suffering from an influenza epidemic as well, the most ordinary medicine had begun to be scarce. Mme. Lafont sacrificed the last of her resources and called in the best doctors she could find. They gave the sick woman one of those preparations of colloidal iron, a rust-colored drug which in a manner still ill-explained produced a notable improvement after a short period of fever. The somnolence and pain of the patient became less marked.

Several weeks passed without any change in her condition. With the return of her strength Renée once more had energy enough to be worried about the cares of existence. She had come to think of Selevine without resentment and had even begun to excuse his conduct to herself. She was genuinely glad to see him again, although she did not let it appear on the surface of their conversation.

Thus the conversation lacked point; the Russian hardly dared broach the subject he had at heart. She told him about the emigrants she had seen passing in the street, bound for the New Atlantis. They were singing and in their hand carts, they carried all their belongings and their children. Renée had envied these women, who would certainly experience some miseries, but would also live a free life and in an atmosphere of love. Selevine realized she was thinking of Leclair.

"I wish I could get away, too,"

she said, "far away from these sad spectacles to a country where civilization is not yet spoiled. Alas, it is impossible!"

She became absorbed in some reflection.

"I often ask myself what the future can hold for two single women like us, with unpaid bills piling up."

"What about me? Don't you count me as your friend?"

"What can you do, my poor Selevine?"

"Quite a bit if you will merely accept my presence." He hesitated a moment, embarrassed. "Give me only a little of your confidence . . . I have ideas. I want to get you out of your troubles."

The young woman did not answer, but her contemptuous look halted on his blemished face and then ran down to the hands which clumsily stopped their movements.

He was conscious of a sudden access of despair.

"Renée, give me a chance. Don't abandon me."

"You have abandoned yourself."

"If I could somehow explain—"

"I am not asking for your secrets."

These dry replies put him out of countenance.

"Better give it up than try to deceive myself," he said, in a muffled voice. "But inaction I have—after all, I'm only hurting myself." Other words mounted to his lips, but he did nothing but babble. He was relieved by the sudden entry of Mme. Lafont and he bade that old lady good-bye so brusquely that she was left with mouth wide open. But Renée retained him for an instant and with unexpected cordiality, begged him to come again.

In the street he recalled the pretty smile which had illumined her face.

It was April and a precocious spring had surprised the people of Paris. In a few days the trees of the avenues were covered with flowers, and the sky, washed by rains, ex-



tended above the city in a blue vault against which floated a silvery fleece. Odorous breezes, warm sunlight, came to caress foreheads lined with care and eyes burning with fever.

And Selevine thought:

"Nature seems to say to her spoiled and unhappy child, 'Why this despair and agitation? Some of your toys have been broken, but you still have all the truly good things, the forests, the light, the tinkling water, all the magnificent and diverse gifts of the holy earth.'"

**B**UT men were deaf to this eloquent voice. They ran through the streets, overwhelmed with sorrows and regrets. They gathered the last of their strength to tear at each other, still submissive to the magic of signs which had long since lost all meaning.

The quarter where the engineer lived was generally peaceful. In the past it had been an aristocratic residential neighborhood, but now almost entirely deserted, it showed closed doors along the borders of its parks and beneath the spring branches. Luxurious limousines no longer coursed along its avenues, but one occasionally heard the marching feet of a regiment of blacks and the beat of their drums. Groups of mounted police sometimes went by on bronze-shod horses, driving before them crowds of tramps.

Selevine walked through the garden-bordered streets and promenaded in the parks where whole groves of trees had been cut down. Among the stumps rose masses of rocks and the ugly forms of the concentration camps for contagious diseases. As the Blue Evil gained the mastery, the steady noise that was the breathing of the great city seemed to become thin and irregular. Only the occasional crack of a gun, answered by the barking of dogs served to break the silence.

In certain parts of the city the

storekeepers had branched out in new directions. The rarity of money obliged them to adopt the primitive mode of direct barter as a medium of exchange. Utensils in neo-fibrite, porcelain stoves, cooking vessels of refractory materials were much prized. A package of steel needles, guaranteed immune to the *Siderosis*, was an object beyond price. One day Selevine saw an illustrative occurrence near where he lived. An old woman who had traded a pair of curtains for one single precious needle, was weepingly exhibiting the little piece of steel, broken in two. How would she be able to make her living now? The store-keeper, a Levantine of sorts, shrugged his shoulders.

"Pfut! I guaranteed against the *Siderosis*, but not against accidents."

Someone who was examining a tray of mineral objects, looked up and came over. It was a man named Wronsky, bareheaded, wearing a belt of wooden plaques and a stone bracelet according to the prevailing fashion.

"Selevine! I'm glad to see you. Hein! What do you think of this for a sign of our times? The poor woman doesn't know that she can buy glass needles that are practically unbreakable. They make them at Dresden according to a secret process.

"Admire this little toy I just picked up, will you? It's a blade of green obsidian, sharp as a razor, with a horn handle. Norwegian product. With it I could cut your throat or stab you to the heart as neat as you please. Our ancestors, the lake-dwellers, couldn't have made a better one. It is one of the benefits of the *Siderosis* that it is making us substitute the infinitely varied grains and warm colorings of stone for the uniformly polished surfaces of the metals.

"No more quantity-made parts.

The careful craftsman will replace the repetitious machine that the modern workman has become. This age of ours is the beginning of an artistic renovation.

"Most of the conceptions are still clumsy and paralyzed by centuries of custom, but some are rich with the promise of the future. If you will come over to my rooms, I'll show you a collection of daggers, scrapers and punches in flint and fossil ivory. I also have some horn bracelets and stones that have been engraved in the sober and noble style that marks the true artist. I adore such things. In a more practical direction there has been appreciable progress also. I have a whole series of utensils in neo-fibrite and vitrified asbestos that are something for their manufacturers to be proud of. My mistress, who can cook like an angel, is delighted with them. But one thing is lacking, and it's annoying."

He passed his hand across his face.

"Bah! We have to wear beards. It's the fashion, but—"

Selevine could not keep from smiling.

"You think I'm absurd," Wronsky said. "I attach a certain importance to such little details. But just the same I find this little business of the broken needle has its importance. The importance is this that it is not here, where they are selling the old things, that we will find interesting observations, but out at Vanves where there is a permanent fair for the new type of products. You will find all the 'ersatz' of iron there, specimens of all the non-metallic arts and crafts. I'll introduce you to Silber, the physiological mechanic. He ought to be in now."

Taking Selevine by the arm, he led him toward the river. The bridge at Issy was not entirely destroyed but it was unsafe and they had to take a raft-like ferry. A ferryman guided the raft by a line of cords

stretched across the stream, another pushed away floating masses of wood with his pikepole. Numberless tiny clouds were floating in the sky.

Submitting to the influence of his melancholy, Selevine permitted his glance to follow down the muddy line of the river till it joined the horizon. The scene had the cold inhuman light of the countries of snow. He had difficulty in recognizing Moulineaux. The trees had been cut down, the houses that threatened to fall had been demolished and he could see as far as Meudon, where the fogs were already gathering. A crowd of sellers, buyers and wanderers was pressing along the esplanade.

He was deafened by the barking as he approached. One whole side of the market was occupied by kennels. The insecurity of the individual in the face of the growing number of marauders, the breakdown of all means of defense, had caused an energetic search for breeds of dogs capable of being trained for defense. Among some families dog-meat also appeared on the bill of fare, and little dogcarts had become a favorite method of transportation. The most favored breeds came from Belgium. Young men, bearded and with long hair and young women clothed strangely but elegantly in berets, leather blouses held together by laces and seamless moccasins, went by in pairs, cudgel in hand and holding semi-savage hounds in leash. Others were drawn by Great Danes harnessed to little carts.

Rickshaws drawn by runners in the Japanese style were still rare enough to attract attention.

The crowd was most dense on the north side. There were exhibited all the products which were replacing metal—most of them imported from Germany. Pressed paper, fibrite, fibro-cement, hard woods, which had been impregnated or petrified by



various processes, silicates, lacquers, asbestos, all varieties of glass, various alloys immune to attack, metallic dusts which had been combined under pressure and finally the latest invention of all—the Agglomerates, which were colloids of iron and stone produced in an atmosphere of argon and treated with waves of infra-sound.

In the hall devoted to tools one could find files in calorized glass, resistant to any amount of filing, but falling into fine powder if their points were broken, knives in jade, hatchets formed of hard lava, diaphanous minerals, irised crystals and fashionable slave collars.

Workmen specializing in stones were already numerous. There were primary workers who detached the nuclei from the rocks, breakers who split off pieces with cutting edges with a single well-placed blow, grinders, cutters who used bows and water in the manner pictured in Egyptian tombs, chisellers, engravers, and workmen who had already become expert at sharpening hooks and piercing the eyeholes of needles in stone or horn.

Seated on the ground an old man patiently polished a piece of flint. All these stone objects were much favored, not because of any necessity, for the stocks of metals were still far from being exhausted, but because everybody wanted something new and novel. It was the fashion for women to sell their gold mounted jewels in exchange for those fashioned "à la sauvage."

Selevine looked over these things with a distracted air, but it was the exhibit in a shoe window which really drew his attention. Here a group of inventors, anticipating the disappearance of metal, had banded together to exhibit models of various necessary appliances; sextants and astrolabes intended to replace compasses, sundials, siderometers for searching out the invisible traces of

the malady in masses of steel.

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## XIX

### *A Dying World*

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THERE also one saw singular clocks without gears, wheels or bearings, and water-clocks in the Greek fashion vied with hour-glasses of all forms and sizes. There was even a giant hour-glass for the measurement of sidereal time—the time by which the dislocation of continents and the alterations in the stars are measured—and smaller ones for the measurement of the tiny spaces of human time, including an ingenious device for the pocket provided with an automatic mechanism for reversing the glass.

Selevine thought that the coincidence of two needles on a dial had become a familiar image which humanity would be some time in learning to do without. The conception of a closed cycle of time is inherent in the human mentality. At bottom is it not a summation of all man's knowledge, and indeed, of his conception of the Universe? "Yes," he remarked aloud, "Time is an old serpent who holds his tail in his mouth."

"Speaking of snakes," offered Wronsky, "I saw something quite curious here the other day. Imagine a needle with an interior tube which connects with a reservoir of venom. It is inoffensive in appearance, but more deadly than the jaws of the cobra. You speak of disarmament through the loss of iron! Go look at the War Booths—there are enough things to make any gentleman desirous of doing away with his neighbor hesitate for some time. Maces, clubs, tomahawks, cutlasses, lances, slings, arbalests and boomerangs are offered for your choice. And

these names suggest the outlines of primitive instruments, but that really means nothing. The inventors of the new ones have merely been inspired by certain ideas.

"There, my dear fellow, you will find instruments due to the collaboration of the Amazonian savages who hunt for and preserve human heads and the best engineers of the Polytechnic Institute; cruel little things which do their duty exactly, coolly and intelligently, and are agreeable to have around the house. Arrows can be carried in a cane, for instance, a needle-dagger in a cigarette-holder, poisoned needles in a glove, so arranged that you can kill a friend in the simplest fashion while shaking hands with him. They are selling slings that ladies can carry in their handbags and blow-pipes with half a dozen poisoned darts in the form of fountain pens. I won't bother to remind you about the lovely asphyxiating gases, the incendiary grenades, the corrosive liquids and disease germs you can buy. The pacifists rejoiced too soon over the destruction of iron.

"A tiger with his claws trimmed is none the less a tiger and man is not ready to renounce his classical coat of arms—that is, spots of blood on a Christ crucified. Ah, no! Means of destruction are not and will not be lacking and the military men still have a good many bright days before them. At least that is the opinion of General Fremont. You saw that he has demanded big credits for the army from the Chamber recently? A surgical instrument will do its duty even if it is not made of steel.

"In fact, war is the only remedy capable of saving the bourgeoisie now. A sacrifice of several million men is necessary for the recovery of Europe. The worker without work must disappear and battle offers a form of death whose pleasures have never been doubted in the best cir-

cles. And the Germans are agitating for the same thing on their side of the frontier. The newspapers have been arousing the popular feelings most easy to arouse, and on the whole, it will not be difficult to drum up some reason for a conflict."

"The people will refuse to march," affirmed Selevine.

"Not at all. They will step out to get themselves killed with delight. While appeals to the brotherhood of man have encountered nothing but indifference and annoyance, the collective crime of war is always capable of rousing these great exaltations of the soul to the point of self-sacrifice of which the poets sing."

Selevine was unable to restrain a gesture of annoyance.

Wronsky laughed.

"Good, I see the prospect annoys you. Well, let's talk about something else; the peaceful productions of the golden age following the age of iron, for example. Let's go see Silber and his squirrel-cage motors and intelligent dogs. After all, who knows? Perhaps I'm wrong and he will have the last word after all."

THEY walked on for a while, arriving before a door which the Pole pushed in without ceremony. Selevine saw a man of uncertain age, bald, with a broken nose and uncombed beard, clothed in a sort of shawl made of fur. He seemed intimidated by the presence of his two visitors, but Wronsky put him at his ease by talking about his inventions.

"Machines without metal for boring, polishing, threshing grain, weaving, all utilizing animal energy," he explained in painful French. His dirty nails ran over the wheels of fibrite, the wooden connecting rods, the bearings in greased stone. Showing them the faults of the early models he had there in his workshop, he excused himself for not being able to demonstrate his latest and most interesting creations. Aided by



his wife and his son—"a child of fifteen, gentlemen, but always the first in his classes"—he had constructed machines whose power was furnished by a kind of pocket menagerie.

At present he was measuring the strength, production of energy and fatigue point of a dog in a rotating drum. His face exhibited a mixture of ingenuity, misogyny and charlatanism. As Selevine understood Russian the conversation was carried on in that tongue, and according to the habit of the sons of Abraham, the inventor generalized.

"The suppression of metal is obliging us to make increasing use of muscular contractions, and the brutal energies developed demand resistant organs."

"But the output of energy from animals is very small," protested Selevine.

"Evidently. Man needs to reduce his pretensions, that is all. We shall move about more slowly and carry less heavy burdens. A simple change of scale. In a century the new habits will be formed and no one will think them anything but normal."

"And you are studying the properties of muscle?"

"More correctly, the methods of utilizing it in such a way as to produce the maximum effect with the minimum output of energy. Organic movements are complex, varying with the weather and other conditions. Our machines, generally speaking, envisage rotation in a continuous cycle. Now the intermediate stage between these two types of action must be established. Up to the present nothing useful has been accomplished in this direction, except for the bicycle. Look what men can accomplish with this simple machine, having no other resources than his own strength. Then you will understand what enormous fields of action lie before motorized muscle."

Then with a smile that somehow made him look oddly younger, he told of his great hope, the dream of his existence—the invention of an avicycle, an airplane without a motor.

"What did I tell you," said Wronsky, as the inventor stepped out of the room for a moment. "He's full of ideas that chap. Too bad, he's such an unsociable creature."

Night had fallen. Trembling flares illuminated the scene around them. A group of visitors arrived, all acquaintances of Wronsky's. Very young for the most part, students or sportsmen of the days gone by, they now made their livings by various expedients, trafficking in different articles. They were not at all interested in women or politics, but discussed business and sport with the same passionate interest they would have devoted to automobiles a few years before.

Seeing that Wronsky was surrounded, Selevine seized the occasion to escape.

THE crowd bored him. He felt himself an utter stranger to this younger generation and its occupations. The idea that the world, even damaged as it was, was going to turn in a direction he had never imagined, was somehow painful to him. He did not like to think of the new aspect of things and preferred to ruminate various projects of despair. Was not the future dead for him in every sense?

He wandered about for some time, and ultimately, exhausted with fatigue, lay down on a bench by the river-bank. The air was filled with the scent of rotting things. A boat went by, avoiding the ruins of a bridge. The shadows covered the city, inert after its rude labors of the day. He had the illusion of being the only person awake, a sentinel watching over a sleeping world. A star came out in the sky. With an asso-

ciation of ideas, he thought of the Blue Evil and his eyes rested on the ruined bridge. In the shadow the girders seemed covered with a silver leprosy and about the ruins, which still retained the essential lines of the structure, there was something ferocious and convulsive. One seemed to be looking at the liberating effort of metal upon itself, seeking to break the bonds of form imposed upon it to return to the primitive state from which it had issued.

An approaching passerby broke the thread of the Russian's thoughts. The sense of his own misery, of his irremediable isolation, swept over him. He envied the sleep of the animals who are untormented by thoughts. He evoked confused pictures from the abysses of his memory, and then his thoughts returning to Renée, he was oppressed by the presentiment, the certainty of her approaching death. He represented her in his mind's eye in various attitudes of torment and pleasure, then struck down by the mad lady, controlled by the spasms to which it gave birth—and a terrible peace seized upon his heart.

Leaving his residence several days later, Selevine ran into a line of troops. Every street, every bridgehead was held in force, for the news of the Toulon mutinies had just come in and the Communists were active in all the laboring-class suburbs. Sailors had deserted the battleships and soldiers had fired on their officers. The principal movers in the revolt had been executed at Paris after summary courts-martial. Whether through feebleness or malice, the government had turned the bodies over to the families of the executed men.

After this the government reinforced its measures of coercion. Nobody could carry on the most ordinary business of life without a card of identity. Actions against foreigners were begun, the laborers brought

from Austria and Poland being the chief sufferers. Difficulties of transport had prevented the repatriation of these miserable people on the evacuation of the North. They lived in camps, in surroundings of incredible beastliness, living on garbage, devoured by vermin, to the horror of the nearby inhabitants and the despair of the sanitary authorities. They were ultimately pushed pell-mell to the frontiers by the troops and there at last they received permission to die.

The Communists became the object of the strictest surveillance. Police spies were everywhere. People lived in continual fear of an anonymous denunciation.

Toward the month of October there was a change in conditions. The government began distributing provisions, but this measure, which was begun with the best of intentions, had the worst of results, for its only effect was the ruin of the small shopkeepers. At the same time the difficulties of all forms of transport became acute. The Reconstruction Trust went bankrupt and the possibility of a Franco-German war began to be discussed. At this date the exodus from the cities began. A sure instinct urged men to fly from the constricted spaces where interest and not brotherly love, had caused them to gather.

**I**NFINITE wisdom knows how to place in the heart of the unbeliever the instruments for his own punishment. Selevine felt keenly the pangs of a disease he had never before experienced, the agency of approaching extinction, of death, nude and without disguises. He had attained, by the route of logic and doubt, the abyss foreseen by those who bore the intellectual torches in advance.

He found a harsh satisfaction in observing the vanity of all effort, the incoherence of life when it is aggra-



vated by hypocrisy and hatred.

The presence of Renée alone could give him relief from his thoughts. When he was with her everything was peace, tranquility and silence. Stretched out at her full length, her figure still preserving the lines of her youth, she seemed to sleep, overcome by successive waves of pain. Her eyelids were half-shut, the nails of her thin fingers gleamed among the shadows like the jewels she wore. Mme. Lafont sat near, shrivelled in her shawl, with bright eyes in a face of wax.

An involuntary movement on the part of the sick woman exposed a ravaged shoulder, beneath which the too-tired heart slept and the fever of her worst days burned again. Suffering and passion inspire the same attitudes in women. Selevine imagined himself lying at her side, regaining the purity of his youth by the mere contact with the white garments she wore.

His financial resources had diminished and he was tortured by hunger as well as by the deprivation of his favorite drugs. At one period he attempted to find work. As he had expected, his efforts were futile. Being without a government connection, he could find nothing but the most degrading tasks. He even haunted the forges where men were hired to handle the scraps of diseased steel, but his appearance brought him nothing but a series of rebuffs. Too weak now to think of leaving France, he abandoned himself to his inevitable fate.

The month of December drew to its close. A sharp cold spell followed snow-squalls. Long lines of the poor formed in front of every place where there was room for them to sleep. Markets were pillaged, storekeepers murdered. Each in their turn, the government, the middlemen and the unemployed were blamed for conditions. Foreigners, Jews and vagabonds were persecuted. In the common misery all pity was banished.

One evening a street-gamin brought a message to Selevine from Mme. Lafont. Renée's illness had taken a turn for the worse and in her distress the poor old woman did not know where to look for help. The doctor Selevine summoned shook his head over her. As she was suffering, he gave her an injection of morphine, and she passed insensibly from the temporary sleep it afforded to the permanent sleep of death.

## EPILOGUE

### *A New World*

SEPARATED by racial prejudices, but victims of the same necessities, modern nations are economically interdependent. All social progress, all evolution damages the common interest when it attains beyond the common level. As among individuals, an overwhelming superiority of genius or fortune is intolerable. The statistical curves and their tendency are the same for all countries—they converge in the direction of a straight line, and the future and the unforeseen are perishing from an earth embellished by the progress of mathematics. The generations of the future, having disposed of the uncomfortable burden of intelligence, will be able to attain the happiness of a mechanical society which has been definitely regulated.

But the Blue Evil, by destroying industry, compromised this beautiful vision of the future. A few years were sufficient to hurl down the whole "edifice of progress," a piece of composite construction whose ruins went to join those of the ancient ages. The equilibrium which menaced the mind of the race with sterility gave place to something unstable and heterogeneous, the only thing capable of drawing new crea-

tions of the mind out of the crisis.

Peoples no longer communicated with one another and evolved in different directions. The unity so elaborately constructed was shattered. For this reason the history of the Post-Metal Age is in many respects like that of the pre-metal ages.

Amid the immediate confusion certain tendencies were felt at once.

Nations carried to their logical conclusions the measures which had disarmed the weak and the perfected inequality of the modern social structure attained the grandeur of a state religion, for whose principles there were even martyrs and monks. Others, on the contrary, wished to redress natural deformities in a thorough-going manner and sacrifice the individual to the mass, a procedure which caused all to partake of the same miseries without sharing in the same joys; others still wished a liberty without any bounds, and the dispersion of crowds.

The peoples of India and China went rapidly toward complete anarchy. Collectivism triumphed in Germany and England, but with different characteristics. America and Japan, as yet little touched by the *Siderosis*, gorged themselves with the spoils of Europe at the risk of being stifled under their own acquisitions. As for France, the country of order and good sense, the preferred home of the wealthy of all nations, it amalgamated the traditions of various political systems according to the national genius.

Torn by civil conflicts, without arms and without warships, her industry ruined, staggering under the burden of enormous debts, she still had a certain influence in the world. The gold which had fled from her banks took refuge in old socks and teapots, and from this invisible prudence there radiated an influence which warmed chilled hearts.

An attempt was made to recuperate certain metals by sterilizing them

with fire, then storing them in silos protected by lead sheeting. But the flowers of the Evil attacked them before they had become cold. The waves penetrated the interior of the ground, rotting the minerals and all the other treasures of the depths.

By way of the submarine cables the Blue Evil crosses the oceans, with its factories of reinforced concrete, its ports filled with ships, its street congested with vehicles, its multiple workshops, machines and bridges; America in turn felt the victorious march of the plague.

The shortage of manufactured products engendered bitter economic rivalries. England and the United States disputed acrimoniously for the precious metals, coal and wood. The Germans inundated the world with special alloys whose use provoked grave disasters. It was then that the patriotic campaigns begun by certain newspapers on the occasion of a tariff conflict produced their result in a new world war. The order for mobilization was voted in France by a narrow majority of politicians anxious to give the people an outlet for their fury. The concentration of the army was effected in indescribable disorder; the soldiers were undernourished, discontented and exhausted by the first forced marches they had to make.

Acts of indiscipline were quickly followed by murders of officers. Entire regiments mutinied and passed from mutiny to rebellion. Masters of three frontier cities, the insurgents began a march on Paris. The government confided the defense of the capital to General Felder and the assailants were repulsed.

The cruel fantasies of this dictator started bloody factional conflicts which ended by plunging the whole country into famine and civil war. He was assassinated and two chiefs of the popular party came into power. Their first victims were their own comrades and the passions they



released were long in dying down. The "Central Council" promised to bring back order, work for all, and supplies of food. The unemployed were forcibly enlisted in a labor army. Great works of public utility, including the foundations of the new Ironless City were begun.

Little by little the reign of factions gained complete control; all France broke up into tiny morsels. The primitive forms of administration necessitated by the growing paralysis of all means of communication and exchange came to the fore. The tendency toward agglomeration which had characterized the industrial age was thrown into reverse by the operation of the Blue Evil.

But this tendency did not dissolve the difficulties of the situation. If some districts enjoyed a relative amount of security, it was only because they submitted to the tyranny of local "Councils." The whole people longed for deliverance, but such was the general lassitude that the labor dictators were able to retain their power for three years.

**N**O SHIP any longer plowed the deserted seas. Only a few fishing barks, made of planks held together with wooden pegs, ran along the coasts. The radio stations were long since gone and the electric cables, the last nerve-fibers uniting the vital centers, broke down one after another. The plowshare and the axe rusted away; the needle broke in the hand of the seamstress. The instrument, the machines, all the antennae which completed and prolonged the human senses, were irredeemably lost or broken.

Men learned once more the lesson that the body is fragile. They adapted themselves to circumstances, but now they were no more than rather inefficient animals in the wild forests of the world. The complexity of modern existence, the interrelation of every fact, and their influence on

every domain of life, precluded any possibility of the reconstruction of civilization. Specialization and the interdependence of organisms—those master-products of modern society—brought about the fall of the entire structure through the failure of one of its parts.

The great cities, monstrous tumors of materiality, concretions of stone and steel on a sterile soil, were the least spared.

Stocks of cereals and combustibles were quickly exhausted. Camping in tunnels and cellars everywhere, the poor emerged to pillage the ruined houses and tear up wooden sidewalks. Like derelicts carried along by some invisible current, homeless men wandered through the streets.

All efforts in the direction of improvement broke down on the lack of agricultural instruments. When winter came, the aged, the weak and those without resources perished. The skeleton corpses of peasants were found stretched out in the fallow fields, their mouths filled with the earth that had failed to support them. The workless who had left the cities came flooding back, demanding food.

Paris saw villagers arriving, pulling their handcarts or carrying skinny children, wanderers clothed in rags, their feet torn, scorbutics who could be flattened by a breath.

Corpse robbers were recognizable by their furtive air and their appearance of hunted animals. Those who had been captured by the peasants were nailed alive to trees.

For the first time in four centuries wolves in great numbers appeared in France. They came from the Ardennes, the Black Forest and still more distant haunts, following the track of the Great Famine. Their indefatigable hordes converged in a single direction—the South, toward which they were drawn by some inexplicable instinct. High in the heavens soared birds of prey.

Over the frontiers, also, surged a horde of famished creatures with limbs more rigid than dead wood and bodies devoured by ulcers and vermin. They came from Austria where a whole people was perishing amid terrible contortions, from the Polish ghettos, from sanitary camps (those centers of hate and despair) and they marched on without paying any attention to the bodies with which they sowed the roads, in spite of hunger and cold, in spite of the ferocious animals and still more pitiless men. Nothing could halt this current of life which did not wish to die.

By instinct they moved toward the cities where there were still stores of provisions. Paris was the center of this movement. Works of defense were hastily thrown up. Guards watched at the gates of the city while these specters, whom walls could not halt, marched on to surround them.

Already, germs brought in by the immigrants had engendered epidemics of strange diseases. Among the ruins and rotting corpses of men and animals, rats roamed about carrying bacilli. Water escaped from the conduits and terrible fires devoured whole cities without being checked. Not a day went by without some new crime or horror coming to shatter the nerves or arouse sleeping ferocities.

All constraints—law, morals and wisdom—were removed. And as the common people slipped into mere beastliness their masters showed the disquieting visages of maniacs and scoundrels, unmasked and unashamed. It seemed that the Blue Malady was sapping not only the physical vitality of organisms but consciences as well.

There were brawls everywhere. Men fought and killed, not only for necessity or to gain booty, but out of a mere taste for killing. The weak gathered around those who had

strong muscles and intrepid characters. With the coming of night everybody barricaded himself in his house while a multitude of vagabonds raced through the streets committing the worst excesses and laughing at the police forces.

Certain of them acquired a sinister renown, and accomplished deeds that seemed like those of some savage delirium.

Nobody knew the number of these night-raiders or where they lived; with the close of day they issued suddenly from their unknown haunts to murder and violate.

**I**N THE middle of the night there would be cries, the sounds of battle, the galloping of a horse. A flame would burst out somewhere, hurling back the intense shadows. The militia, running to the spot, stared stupidly at the flaming houses, the rooms with their doors broken open, the corpses of children among the bloody ruins. Women disappeared to be found later in abandoned fields or waterways, their bodies mangled.

Several of these "chauffeurs" (the old name still hung about them) were caught and executed without quieting public opinion. These events increased in number. At last, in a great drive, some hundred of the bandits were seized at once. They were discovered to be, not people of the lowest classes, but the élite of society. By day they moved about the streets quietly and soberly. No marks of insanity appeared on the faces behind which such horrible plans had been formed.

Those who judged them were astonished at the serenity with which their victims heard the sentences which condemned them to death. Nobody was capable of understanding these artists in death who had wished to draw unforgettable aesthetic pleasures from the sufferings of others. They were children of an age which had rejected the Absolute



and scorned the Ideal, and they had sought these infinite needs of man in impossible horrors.

The executions were numerous, to the great pleasure of the lower classes. They seized the miserable bodies from their guardians and tore them to pieces. Grimacing faces watched the process avidly and those who could not take part in these delicious public murders watched them with eagerness. The executions roused wild and savage cries of excitement in the mob which, overwhelmed by the pleasure of the moment, spread through the city for battle and pillage. It was with difficulty that horsemen broke them into little groups and beat them with clubs.

Finding the operations of justice too slow for their taste the citizens demanded a pitiless suppression of such movements and sought to bring it about by extra-legal means. Secret societies, anarchists affiliated with the ravagers, embarked on obscure machinations, sowing the germs of contagious diseases in various places, poisoning rivers, setting fire to private and public buildings. Sinister tales passed from mouth to mouth and aggravated the universal suspicion and fear. To get rid of your enemy, you accused him of murder. A chance resemblance, a sign wrongly interpreted, would cause the crowd to hurl itself on some inoffensive stranger.

Man hunts were organized with enthusiasm. Every telegraph pole and tree bore its fruit of hanged men. At the corner of the street one found a corpse with a shoelace tightened around its throat, its limbs broken, its throat cut, or emptying its brains into the gutter.

But all other dangers and terrors were quickly forgotten in the arrival of an epidemic.

A contagious influenza which had its origins in the Asiatic lands and among the peoples of Galicia, traversed Austria, ravaged Germany and

at the moment of its greatest violence, reached France. In the laboring class sections, the poor, debilitated by undernourishment, were soon dying by scores. The frightful days of the pestilences of the Middle Ages returned. The fever produced by the disease was high, the exhaustion following was profound.

The sick person died in one night, delirious. Those who resisted the disease were soon carried off by the complications which the enfeebled organism was unable to beat off. In some particularly severe cases even the medicines were turned to poison by the effect of the germs. Worn down as it was the entire country submitted to the attack of the destructive forces without being capable of an effort of recovery, like some great body plunged in a coma. The hospitals were gorged with the sick and all medical stores were exhausted. Without interruption the funeral processions passed through the streets.

The excess of misery and the fear of the contagion provoked cases of dementia and collective suicides. Every day the Seine threw up on its banks green and swollen bodies. When the warm days came a poisonous slime appeared at the bottoms of cisterns and pestilential odors filled the city.

The shadow of the plague stretched over all France, stifling the last sounds of effort in wails of despair. In the deserted streets only a few masked hospital attendants were to be seen, carrying bodies which were taken to the suburbs to be burned in great heaps. The contaminated ruins of the poor quarters were likewise deliberately destroyed by fire. For a whole week a ruddy light never failed to illuminate the sky on the side of St. Denis, where the clocks were still striking the hours.

The vaccination centers, the ambulances, were demolished, and troops of people fled from the city. On foot,

with hardly a rag to cover them, they dispersed along all the roads, disputing for inedible scraps of food, while the villagers locked themselves in or brandished grim clubs beside their growling dogs. As the plague spread the hatred of every man for his neighbor grew apace.

Sometimes a hospital convoy approached the Seine. The last weakened bridges were blown up, and all boats fled to a distance. Those who looked on the spectacle contemplated with horror the black faces of the dead in the tragic river.

Eventually the contagion extended over the whole world and dominated every other thing. Fear exercised its dissolving action on consciences and from that moment the last ties that kept down the beast in man were broken.

**A** LONG the unused highways vegetation began to pierce the stony soil and cover the denuded places with a verdant tapestry. The useful plants perished, fruit trees returned to their wild state, hedges became impenetrable thickets in which birds built their nests. Insects foraged among the stones man had worked to his will. Ivies and lianas moved prudently over the statues, taking possession of places hitherto forbidden to them, while a thousand little animals, seriously occupied with murder, nourishment, love and home, ran about. But in the ruined cities green things still refused to grow.

The water of the heavens washed the white walls of houses which had become great sepulchres. An instinctive terror kept living things away from these desolate places where the bodies were gradually dissolving and where the radiation from the rotting irons produced incurable ulcers on the skin. Only a few ravens built their nests there and a few dogs, strong and wild as wolves, lit the nights with their phosphorescent eyes.

The elements had not yet worn down the granite and the moss had not yet covered the nudity of the constructions of stone wrung from the earth. A heartrending tranquillity emanated from these cities of the people of the metals as the soft lines gradually covered the evidence of their last convulsive effort.

Immense skeletal structures were still to be found there, bushes of tangled wires, columns split like trees by bolts of lightning. Sometimes, with a crackling sound, a pylon would collapse and a dust of rust and cinder would rise; then the silence would fall once more.

After the great epidemics all sound men had fled from these charnel houses. Dispersed throughout the world, enfeebled, discouraged, they despaired of reconquering the metals which had made them masters of the globe. Their mortality-rate was high, for sporadic forms of the contagious diseases were still abroad. The most cultured, being the least adept in the combats of primitive existence, were the first to perish.

As though crushed by the struggle, man permitted Nature to shower blows about his head without attempting to defend himself. The elements beat upon him, the uncultivated ground refused to nourish him, the animals, seeming to understand his fall, became less timorous and asserted their rights to existence with energy. Dogs, which had become accustomed to attack men, followed the trails of the caravans and silently tore out the throats of any laggards.

Returning once more to the ancient means of defense, the people of the villages made great fires and armed themselves with spear and hatchet and carts whose wheels were sections of trees. Some emigrated to more fertile countries, guiding themselves by the stars, after the manner of the ancient navigators, avoiding



traps, digging out canoes, and chasing wild animals. Others replaced the steel plowshare by flakes of flint and forced the unwilling soil to produce a scanty wheat. In France, tribes which rapidly forgot civilized customs grew up. The river-dwellers built huts along the banks and in the plains men constructed towers connected by walls strong enough to resist the attacks of marauding bands.

Nomads, driving before them their herds of horned animals, moved about at random, exchanging skins, fishhooks and vases of clay for the crude bread the agriculturists made of their wheat.

These degenerate descendants of the conquering races showed definite signs of regression and lacked the vitality of the primitive tribes. Fear and defeat had made them somber. Incapable of any sustained effort, irresolute in their actions, they lived the opportunist existence of the hopelessly misfit. Their fitness for survival had declined and already Nature was considering their extermination through her inexorable processes.

The warrior instinct, that source of all the virtues, through which the youth and health of a race finds expression, had been extinguished. They no longer enjoyed fighting and if they killed, it was in a manner without peril to themselves, attacking animals asleep or women and children. Their passions were as debilitated as their bodies, their tendency toward indecision, toward useless cruelty and indolence. Chimerical fears haunted their minds. They had forgotten how to pray, but a kind of complaint escaped them from time to time when they were more than usually oppressed by animal agonies.

Some of them possessed fragments of iron, which they venerated as though it were a fetish of some kind. Little by little the idea of the "Metal-

lic Entity" grew up among them, as a kind of god and the source of splendors beyond the imagination. New religions, based on superstition and bloody sacrifices replaced the ancient beliefs. The cult of stones was reborn. Their ancestors had known that a stone of some kind, fallen from the heavens, had been the cause of their own decline, but they had almost forgotten it. The tradition survived only as a kind of vague terror mingled with admiration. Man was once more drinking at the sources which had nourished his infancy.

**H**UMANITY had lost all community feeling. The displacement and interchange which had agitated individuals from their childhood to their death, which had produced new races, had disappeared. No discordant echoes troubled the immobility of vegetable and stone.

In a world of diminished resources millions of individuals had perished. The survivors followed their ways almost on tiptoe, across places where the brilliant glare of metal burned no longer. They belonged to a less prolific race and one with a taste for contemplation, a horror of noise and movement. An irremediable disappointment veiled their eyes and they had forgotten how to smile.

Once the last combats were over and the epidemics extinguished, they discovered the bitterness of their own condition and regretted the past of their race. The need of doing, the thirst for creation, woke once more. Nothing could satiate this ache, but they searched for means other than material ones for the new types of expression.

The stimulating action of the struggle for existence had ceased to exist. Work and play, have they not their common origin in man's necessity for escaping from his own thoughts? The new race, incapable of breaking its hereditary habits or

of really adapting itself to changed conditions learned all the horrors of reflection.

Eventually the nomads made drugs which dispensed funeral pleasures and gradually deprived the takers of strength. Death, beautified by poisons, had a corrosive savor which very few could resist.

Some of them also perished suddenly without any signs of organic decay. A profound lack of energy marked these sons of a vanished civilization who could not enter the road to a new type of life. For them the cycles of progress had ceased to revolve. But others, who were marked by invisible signs, prepared in curious ways a soil fit to receive the seeds of the future.

One sect of fanatics preached the return to a vegetable life, the negation of form, the denial of physical perceptions and even of knowledge. Religions rich with Oriental quietism exalted the Nirvana, their agents destroyed the last vestiges of progress, sacked the villages that had been rebuilt with so much effort. The fortified towns were given over to barbarisms and disappeared, while other places became the scenes of group murders in moments of erotic frenzy.

Men suffered from torments previously unknown, and heard once more the voice of fear that had been drowned by the noise of the cities. Aspirations unsatisfied by the spasms of the body and the cold drugs of religion wandered wildly. The Cabala and necromancy were reborn. Numberless theosophists, magi, demon-worshippers and occultists, princes of a kingdom of shadows and illusions, rose in all the corners of the earth. They evoked forms situated beyond the realm of physical perception and produced incredible phenomena.

Who can tell how these aberrations reached their ultimate result—through slow evolution or sudden bounds of progress? But there was

ultimately an alteration in the form of human mentality.

Time rolled on, destroying the last vestiges of ancient labor. Generation succeeded to generation while the practical interests and preoccupations of the ancestors became incomprehensible. Interpretations of the subtle forces of intelligence changed; elements never before employed, latent forces, gained the mastery.

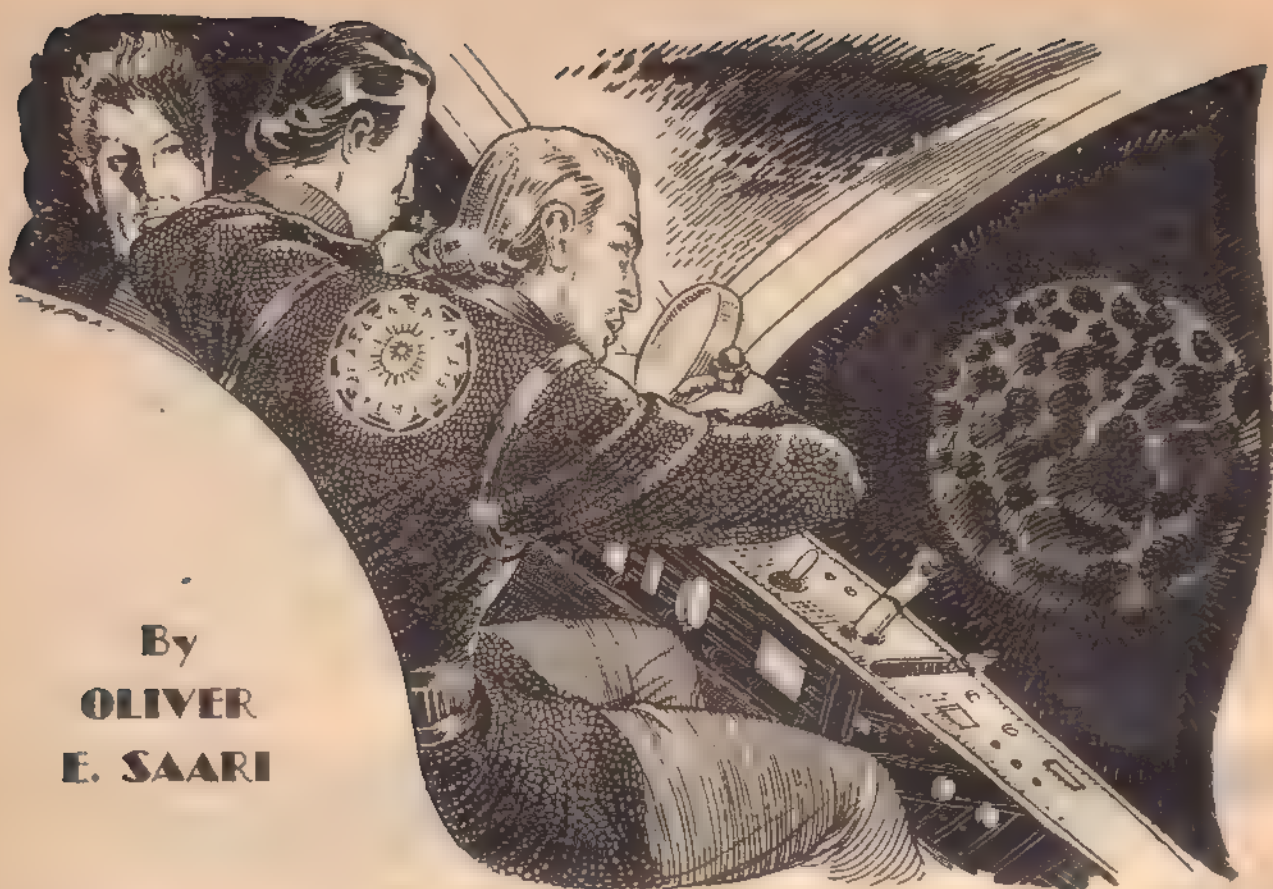
There was an extraordinary development of intuitive perception, a drift toward a mysticism in which both formal intelligence and the blind instincts were destroyed, a contraction of thought which rose out of the mind of the race to identify itself with life.

Philosophers already saw the dawn of a civilization which had no element of the mechanical; and the creative energy of the mind entered the domain of the supersensitive, almost the supernatural. There appeared new modes of thought, engendered in the course of evolution, to satisfy the conditions of environment and the exigencies of life; modes of thought altogether different from those that had been supposed the only ones possible.

. . . Positive science explains the diversity of things and relates them to known facts. It discovers the relation of various phenomena to one another but never their reason for existence; it is an instrument imposed by the necessities of material action and its use supposes the imperfection of the senses. Through its means we can perceive only a small portion of the world. But the soul, the interior abyss which is the home of the infinite, contains things which the intelligence can never explain. It has gathered all the experiences, progress and conquests of life, but these stored treasures are perceived only across a veil of shadows.

And one day man will free himself from matter to search for these treasures.





By  
**OLIVER  
E. SAARI**

# AROUND INFINITY

**T**HROUGH the three quartz windows showed darkness, far deeper than the black of interstellar space. It made one feel totally alone, forever removed from the familiar things of Earth.

The ship's single room was small and the three men made it crowded. The insistent hum of the engine gave some feeling of reality but one had to keep his eyes away from those windows. For utter emptiness was a thing no man could stand.

Dr. Leslie Chapman was hunched over the controls, guiding the ship on its strange flight. Over his stooped shoulder peered tall dark-haired Ivar Augustus.

And Ivar was watching with

something more than interest. Ever since the ship had left familiar space and plunged into this mysterious inter-dimensional continuum Ivar had kept his eyes on the controls.

Behind his saturnine countenance Ivar was thinking dark thoughts which the white-haired doctor and his assistant could not guess. He masked his feelings well.

He knew why the white-haired man had invited him on this trial flight—to gloat over him, to bask in the success of his supreme invention. It would make Dr. Leslie Chapman the greatest scientist in the world.

Ivar knew he could never surpass this machine. The knowledge of his failing prowess in science had been

thrust upon him too often. There was something that made the thought of his failing almost unbearable. It was a boast made long ago, when he and Chapman had been vying for top honors in the same college. He knew he could not fulfill it.

Besides, Dr. Chapman's invention would net him well over a half million dollars in the numerous scientific awards it was sure to bring. Ivar knew of some very good uses for that much money.

He fondled the little smooth-handled object in his pocket—a little invention of his own that might have brought him much. Perhaps it would yet help bring him more. Anything could happen in another universe!

Suddenly Dr. Chapman cried out. "We've done it! Supraluna pulls—"

A SUBTLE force wrenched the ship, twisting the very atoms. It was like a long fall coming to a sudden stop—against nothing. And it had brought them to a new universe.

Ivar had seen the last of Dr. Chapman's manipulations. Now he closed his eyes for a moment, then turned his attention to the view in the ports. A green light appeared in one of the windows.

It was a colossal disc of pale luminescence in a background of starless space—a huge bloated world of purest jade. It must have measured all of ten degrees from edge to edge. Its light was soft and soothing but curiously mottled, an interplay of dark and glowing areas.

"A planet," Dr. Chapman whispered. "A great sunless planet!"

But Dave Manning, the doctor's young assistant, pointed to the control board. "The indicator shows that it has no mass, no gravity.

Look! The needle's pointing in the other direction!"

They all turned and saw a disc of light exactly like the other but smaller.

"That is a planet," said Dr. Chapman. "A little smaller than the Earth to judge from our indicators."

"Let us approach this world," said Ivar. "That is, if your machine can propel itself through space."

Dr. Chapman smiled, moved a lever. A slight acceleration tugged at them. The ship was moving through the alien void.

"Rockets," he explained. "I had an inkling we might materialize here in the middle of space so I installed them."

Their objective soon grew into a world of appreciable proportions. It was like a huge ball splotted with radium paint. This strange sunless world furnished its own light. Dr. Chapman remained at the controls and the dark-haired man still watched. Ivar wanted to learn every operation of this ship. He might have to fly it soon.

Finally a grinding of metal on rock told them the ship had landed. Dr. Chapman's machine had brought them to a planet more remote from Earth than the farthest galaxies!

The ship rested on a level plain that curved away on all sides to a nearby horizon. In the heavens were no stars, no sun. The great disc of green light they had first seen was still visible but a strange thing had happened to it. The ship had gone in a direction away from it but its apparent size hadn't grown smaller with distance. Instead it now seemed many times its former size, covering nearly all the sky with its pale light.

Ivar was the first to notice the phenomenon. "Look," he said, gesturing. "What kind of a universe is



this your machine has brought us to?" Dr. Chapman and his assistant were gazing upward, puzzlement showing on their faces.

Like a mammoth lid the light hung over the world, spreading to within a few degrees of the horizon. There it faded away, leaving a narrow band of space to meet the eye.

"I think I'm beginning to understand," said Dr. Chapman. "I've told you the theory on which I based my ship—the idea that there are many three-dimensional universes, having movements and orbits of their own in a four-dimensional space—just like a planetary system.

"They are simply 'planets' or spheres of curved space. Our own universe is a huge three-dimensional space-world. It has its satellites, smaller universes, circling it.

"What we have done is to travel to one of these satellites—this one. I call it Supraluna. But that light in the sky is explained by the fact that this is a smaller universe. Its curve is finite, here, is near at hand. That patch of light in the sky is this same planet on which we stand and which we see around the universe.

"When we neared the planet we decreased the number of possible lines of vision that did not intersect with this world. Therefore the image grew in apparent size. Probably this is the only world in the entire cosmos, for there is room for no other!"

Ivar, who had been listening to these theories with apparent lack of enthusiasm, interrupted the doctor. "These are all very well in the way of abstract explanations. But what are we to do now?"

The gray-haired scientist smiled. "Dave, unpack the space-suits," he said to his assistant, who had just tested a sample of atmosphere.

Dave Manning obediently pulled

open a trap door at one side of the floor and took out three bundles.

"Oxygen suits," he explained. "The air here is not very breathable!"

The suits, when unrolled, turned out to be one-piece affairs, made of thick fabric and topped by rigid helmets. Goggles of reenforced glass permitted vision.

In a few minutes the men were attired, ready to emerge. Manning went out first, through a cramped airlock. Soon afterward his bulging figure appeared in one of the ports.

Ivar bowed to Dr. Chapman. "After you, Doctor," he said.

WHEN the doctor had climbed through, Ivar picked up the object he had lifted from his pocket. It was a small hollow tube with a metal handle and an enclosed mechanism at one end. He was glad he had brought it along—that athletic looking assistant might prove troublesome.

The terrain was hard beneath their feet and full of little prismatic glitters, as though it were composed of pulverized diamond. But here and there were softer places, where the ground was porous.

All around them were the luminous areas, where the mineral glowed with a vivid green radiance. At close range these could be seen to consist of tiny threads of light pulsing with alien living energy.

"Life!" whispered Dr. Chapman.

The others heard him through ether-wave units in their helmets.

"What do you mean?" asked Ivar.

"Life," repeated the scientist.

"The simplicity of this universe forbids more complex forms. Life here is simply a radiation, feeding on pure matter."

"This is a strange planet," said Ivar slowly. "Unbelievably removed,

inhospitable. What a place to die!"

He felt the tide of resolution rising within him. Now was his chance. No one on earth knew of this trip. He, Ivar, could go back alone and eventually announce the dimension-rotor as his own discovery.

Dave Manning had caught his cryptic mention of death. "What do you mean—die?" he asked, rising.

Ivar was edging toward the ship. He turned, the tube in his hand.

"This is an act of self-preservation on my part," he said coolly. "I have no other alternative."

Dr. Chapman looked up at him, his bewildered face shining through his goggles. "Why—" he began but Ivar broke in with a laugh.

"My meaning is simple enough," he said. "This dimension-rotor of yours is a wonderful machine—one which might add credit to my genius as well as yours." He waved the tube.

"Besides," Ivar went on, "I have long felt that I could follow my scientific pursuits better if Dr. Leslie Chapman were not around to anticipate my discoveries. Do you see? This Supraluna is a wonderful place in which to disappear."

"You wouldn't—"

Ivar's icy laugh came through the earphones.

"I'd advise you both not to try to follow me to the ship. This little device in my hand projects a beam of high-frequency radiations, enough to kill any living creature. A little invention of my own, almost as wonderful as yours, Dr. Chapman."

Slowly Ivar stepped backward toward the ship, watching the others.

Dr. Chapman was pale. He seemed overcome.

It was only the assistant, Manning, Ivar had to fear. He could see they were afraid of the tube in his hand and well they might be. Ivar

could almost read the thoughts of his victims. He could see Manning preparing for a leap and brought his weapon to bear.

And when Manning, suddenly lurched aside Ivar grimly pulled the trigger. A thin beam of ionization leapt from the weapon's muzzle.

It sliced through the space Manning had occupied a split second before. A continuous beam—so much more efficient than a bullet, Ivar reflected with cool pride. He started to flick the ray across the moving man. And that was the last thing he knew.

Ivar Augustus was standing there outlined against the rim of black space. From this blackness, from an infinite distance, a bright beam of light lanced down. Only for a moment did it touch Ivar's broad back.

The weapon went dark. The tall figure swayed, toppled loosely to the ground. Manning rushed ahead and bent over the still form.

"Dead," he said softly.

Later, as the single world of Supraluna diminished beneath their spheroid, the white-haired man said to his assistant, "I am still wondering if we did right to leave the body of Dr. Augustus back there."

"It might have been hard to account for," Manning pointed out.

"You know, of course, how he died?" Dr. Chapman asked.

"Of course. Ivar's weapon projected parallel rays. He forgot, when he fired it, that the rays would follow the curvature of this space, all the way around infinity, and back to the point from which they issued.

"When it missed me the ray curved, followed its course around this universe! Only Ivar happened to be in the way of the returning beam. Ivar Augustus died by his own hand!"

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# The Lanson Screen

*Perhaps the most graphic picture of catastrophe science fiction has ever known—with Manhattan Island the victim as an experiment goes awry!*

*A Novelet by* **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

## CHAPTER I

### WAR MANEUVERS—1937

**H**ARRY OSBORN, First Lieutenant U. S. Army Air Corps, banked his wide-winged bombing plane in an easy, swooping curve. In the distance New York's white pinnacles caught the sun above a blue-gray billowing of twilight ground-haze.

A faint smile lifted the corners of his lips as he glanced overside, saw a train crawl along shining rails and come to a halt. Brown dots appeared from the passenger car behind its locomotive and clustered in ordered confusion about the other

oblong that completed the train's complement.

What appeared from his altitude to be a rather large pocket-handkerchief slid from the car and spread out on the grass. A metal tube glittered in the sun, came into motion, swiveling to the east. It looked like a cap-pistol but Osborn knew it to be an eighteen-inch railroad gun.

He slanted down through lambent air. The terrain below was flat, lushly green. It was entirely vacant save at the very center of its five-



mile sweep of marsh. Here a small hut was visible in the middle of a hundred-yard area ringed by a water-filled moat.

Two manikins stood before the structure. One was clothed in o.d., the other in black. The civilian's tiny arms gesticulated, and he went into the house. The army man moved

sharply into an automobile and sped in the direction of the waiting artillery train.

"Five minutes to zero, Harry," the voice of Jim Rayners, his observer, sounded in the pilot's ear-phones. "What's the dope?"

"Target practise, Jim. We're to spot for the railroad gun and then



we're to bomb. The target is—good Lord!"

The plane wobbled with Osborn's sudden jerk on its stick, steadied. "Harry!" Raynes exclaimed. "What is it, Harry?"

"The target's that house down there. There's a man inside it. I saw him go in."

"The hell! What's the big idea?"

"Search me. There's no mistake though. Orders say 'absolute secrecy is to be maintained by all participants in this maneuver as to anything they may observe . . .'"

"Maybe it's an execution—something special. Maybe—"

" . . . and this order is to be obeyed to the letter no matter what the apparent consequences," Osborn finished. "General Darius Thompson signed it personally, not 'by direction.' Tie that, will you?"

"I can't. But—it's orders." Osborn leveled out, got his eyes focused on the astounding target.

Suddenly there was nothing within the watery circle. Not blackness nor a deep hole nor anything similarly startling but understandable. It was as if a blind spot had suddenly developed in his own visual organs so that he could not see what there was at that particular point—although the wide green expanse of the swampy plain was elsewhere clear and distinct.

A KEY scraped in the door of a third floor flat on Amsterdam Avenue. Junior's two-year-old legs betrayed him and he sprawled headlong on the threadbare rug in the little foyer.

John Sims bent to his first-born, tossed him into the air, caught him and chuckled at the chubby dirt-grimed face. He'd been tired as the devil a moment before. But now—

June Sims was flushed from the heat of the kitchen range but her black hair was neat and a crisply-ironed house dress outlined her young slim figure. Junior was a

warm bundle against her breasts as she kissed John.

"You're early, dear. I'm glad."

"Me too. What's for supper?"

"Pot roast." June's hazel eyes danced. "Johnny, mother phoned. She's going to come over tomorrow night to take care of Junior so that we can go out and celebrate your birthday."

"That's *right*! Tomorrow is May ninth!"

"Yes. Listen, I have it all planned. 'Alone With Love' is playing at the Audubon. We'll see that and then splurge with chow mein. I've saved ten dollars out of house money."

"You have! Maybe you'd better get yourself a hat. I saw an ad—"

"Nothing doing. We're going to celebrate! You go downtown."

And on and on . . .

"They're starting, Harry."

Raynes' businesslike crispness somewhat eased Lieutenant Osborn's feeling that something uncanny was happening below and his hand was steady as he jerked the stick to cope with the bump of the big gun's discharge. A dirt mushroom sprouted in the field.

"Short two-tenths—right, four point three," Jim intoned, correcting the range.

A white panel on the ground acknowledged his message. The cannon fired again and slid back in the oil-checked motion of its recoil.

"Over a tenth—center."

The target was bracketed, the next try must be a hit. Harry banked, leveled out. The brown dots that were the gunners darted about feverishly, reloading. Whatever it was that obscured his vision of the shack would be smashed in a moment now.

The gunners were clear. The pilot saw an officer's arm drop in signal to fire. Yellow light flickered from the big rifle. Osborn imagined he saw the projectile are just under his plane.

His eyes flicked to where the house should be.

And nothing happened! No geyser of dirt to show a miss, no dispersal of that annoying blind spot. Had the gun misfired?

Wait? What was that black thing gliding in mid-air, sliding slowly, then more rapidly toward the ground? The shell that could pierce ten inches of armor was incredibly falling along what seemed like the surface of an invisible hemisphere.

It reached the grass and exploded with the contact. The earth it threw up spattered against—*nothing*. Why hadn't the shell exploded on contact with whatever had stopped it? What was going on down there?

"I—I can't make a report, sir." There was a quiver in Jim's phlegmatic voice. Even his aplomb had now been pierced. "I think it should have been a hit but—"

Again and again the great gun fired. Osborn and Raynes got the signal to go ahead, dropped five three-hundred-pound bombs point-blank on the mysterious nothingness. The area around the circular canal was pitted, excavated, scarred as No Man's Land had never been.

Aviation Lieutenant Harry Osborn flew back to Mitchel Field in the gathering dusk. His young head was full of dizzy visions. Armies, cities, a whole nation blanketed from attack by invisibility. Spheres of nothingness driving deep into enemy territory, impregnable.

It was good to be alive and in the o.d. uniform on this eighth day of May.

In the tea room of the Ritz-Plaza the violins of Ben Donnie's orchestra sobbed to the end of a melodic waltz. Anita Harrison-Smith fingered a tiny liqueur glass nervously.

"I'm afraid, Ted. What if he suspects and—"

The long-fingered hand of the man whose black eyes burned so into hers fisted on the cloth.

"Afraid—that has been always the trouble with you, Nita. You have always been afraid to grasp happi-

ness. Well, I can't make you do it. But I've told you that I'm sick of this hole-and-corner business. If you don't come with me tomorrow as we planned I go alone. You will never see me again."

The woman's face went white and she gasped, "No! I couldn't bear that. I'll come, Ted. I'll come."

Van Norden's sharp dark features were expressionless but there was faint triumph in the sly purr of his voice.

"Have you got it straight? The Marechal Foch sails at midnight tomorrow from Pier Fifty-seven, foot of West Fifteenth Street. You must get away from the Gellert dance not later than eleven-thirty. I'll meet you at the pier but if there is a slip-up remember that your name is Sloane—Anita Sloane. I have everything ready, stateroom, passports, trunks packed with everything you can possibly need. You have nothing to do but get there. Whether you do or not I'll sail—and never come back."

"I'll be there," she breathed.

"Good girl. Tomorrow is the ninth. By the nineteenth we will be in Venice."

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## CHAPTER II

### THE SCREEN

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GENERAL DARIUS THOMPSON stood at the side of his olive-green Cadillac and looked at his watch. The bombing plane was a vanishing sky-speck just above the horizon, the railroad-gun had chugged back toward its base. He was alone under the loom of that sphere of nothingness against which the army's most powerful weapons had battered in sheer futility. It existed. It was real. Unbelievably.

A man stood in the doorway of the flimsy hut that had been the target of the shells. Quarter-inch



lenses made his bulging eyes huge. His high-domed head was hairless and putty-colored, his body obscenely fat. Professor Henry Lanson gave one the impression that he was somehow less than human, that he was a slug uncovered beneath an overturned rock. But his accession to the Columbia University faculty had been front-page news and the signal for much academic gloating.

"Well." From gross lips the word plopped into the warm air like a clod into mud. "What do you think now, my dear General? Against my screen your biggest shells were as puffballs. Yes? Your most gigantic bombs as thistledown. You thought me utterly insane when I insisted on remaining within." The scientist grinned humorlessly. "What do you think now?"

Thompson shook his grizzled head as if to rid it of a nightmare. "You took an awful chance. Suppose it had cracked."

"Cracked! In the name of Planck cannot you understand that the Lanson Screen is not matter that can crack?" The other spread veined pudgy hands. "It is the negation of all energy, a dimensionless shell through which energy cannot penetrate. And since matter is a form of energy—" The physicist checked himself, shrugged.

"But what's the use? I cannot expect you to understand. Besides myself there are perhaps a dozen in the world who could comprehend and none is an American. Enough for you to know that I had to be inside to operate the B machine that cut the negative force the A apparatus set up. From outside it could not be done. The screen would have remained forever and you would not be convinced there had been no effect of your bombardment within it."

"Could you not have managed some remote control device, some way of working your B machine from outside?"

"Lord but you military men are

stupid!" the physicist burst out exasperatedly. "Don't you understand yet that once the Lanson Screen is erected all within is as absolutely cut off from the rest of the universe as if it were a different space, a different dimension? Nothing can penetrate within—electricity, wireless, the cosmic rays, the sun's radiations. *Nothing!*"

"Then if a city were covered by it, as you suggest, there would be no means of communication with the outside?"

"That is correct."

"If knowledge of this were universal there could be no more war." Thompson's grey eyes lifted and met the other's. A momentary silence intervened while a message flashed between these two so diverse characters. Then the general went on. "But if it were the exclusive property of a single nation that nation could become master of the world."

Lanson nodded. His voice betrayed knowledge of the *rapprochement* established in that single long glance. "If I published my results I should gain very little from it. But if I sell it to one power it is worth almost anything I choose to demand."

"That is why I have worked at it alone. That is why I have never set the details down on paper to be stolen. After I have sold the invention to you secrecy will be your concern—but till you meet my terms all knowledge of how I produce the effect remains here in my brain." Lanson tapped his clifflike brow. "Here and nowhere else."

"After we purchase it you still might sell your device to others."

"With a million dollars in hand I shall have no temptation to do so. No one could want or use more. That is one reason why you should be willing to recommend its payment."

The general shrugged. "I can get it for you when I am convinced that you can veil an entire city as you did this one small house. It seems to me that so tremendous a task, requiring

such huge installations and such vast power, would be forbiddingly costly."

THE physicist's short grating laugh was contemptuous. "I'll shield New York for you with the same machine I used here, with the same power—storage batteries not larger than those in your car. Their energy is needed for only an instant, to start the complex functioning of forces whose result you have just witnessed. I'll erect a screen for you about Manhattan Island, an ellipsoid as high and as deep as the least axis of the enclosing rivers. Will that satisfy you?"

"If you can do it and I cannot blast through it will. When can you get ready?"

"As soon as I can move my machines to the required location and set them up. Tomorrow night if you wish."

"Very well. What help do you require?"

"Only an army truck to convey my apparatus and, since I will use the rivers as a delimiting guide for the screen, a place near the water to set it up."

The general was eager now, eager as the other. "I'll order a truck out there at once. And there is an army pier at West One Hundred and Thirtieth Street that you can use. I'll see that it is made ready for you."

Midnight of May eighth, 1937. An army truck noses into the Holland Tunnel. On its flat bed are two tarpaulin-covered bulks, machinery of some sort. Its driver is crowded against his wheel by the rotund form of a black-clad civilian, whose chins hang in great folds on his stained shirt and whose bulging eyes glow behind thick lenses with a strange excitement. The truck comes out on Hudson Street and turns north.

Tenth Avenue is alive as puffing trains bring the city's food for tomorrow. A herd of bewildered cattle file into an abattoir. West End Ave-

nue's apartment houses are asleep. Under the Riverside Viaduct a milk plant is alight and white tank trucks rumble under its long canopy.

At One Hundred and Twenty-ninth Street the army van waits for a mile-long refrigerator train, loaded with fruit from California, to clear the tracks it must cross. The way is cleared. The truck thunders across cobbles and steel, vanishes within the dark maw of a silent pier.

Two blocks eastward a lighted subway train crawls out on its trestle for a breath of air, pauses fleetingly, dives underground again like a monstrous serpent seeking its burrow. Above the southward course of that burrow midtown Broadway is a streak of vari-colored illumination, exploding into frantic coruscation and raucous clamor at Forty-seventh Street.

Crowds surge on sidewalks, in shrieking cabs, private cars—pleasure seekers with grim, intent faces rushing to grills, night clubs—rushing home, rushing as if life must end before they can snatch enough of it from greedy Time. Blare of the latest swing tune sets the rhythm for them from a loudspeaker over the garish entrance of a so-called music store.

Time writes its endless tale in letters of fire drifting along a mourning band around Time's own tower.

MARKET CLOSES STRONG TWO  
POINTS UP . . . PRESIDENT AN-  
NOUNCES RECOVERY ACCOM-  
PLISHED . . . CHAMPION CONFID-  
ENT OF VICTORY FRIDAY . . .  
HITLER DEFIES LEAGUE . . . PO-  
LICE WILL SMASH DOCK RACKET  
SAYS VALENTINE . . . GIANTS  
WIN . . .

*There is no Mene, Mene, Tekel Up-  
harsin written on that slender wall  
for some prophet to read.*

Felix Hammond knots the gold sash rope of his black silk dressing



gown. His satin slippers make no sound as they cross the thick pile of the glowing Kermanshaw on the floor of his study to a darkly brooding Italian Renaissance secretary. He fumbles in the drawer for a silent moment, pulls out a book whose tooled-leather cover should be in some museum. He sits down, opens the book.

Minuscular neat writing fills page after page. Hammond reads an entry. Something that might be a smile flits across his ascetic countenance. His bloodless lips wince at another item. He riffles the sheets rapidly to the first blank space, reaches for a fountain pen and starts writing.

May 8: Wednesday. Another day gone. I confess I do not know why I continue this diary, except it may be that it serves as a reminder of the utter futility of life. There are, however, certain scarlet pages, and lavender ones also, that still have the power to titillate emotions I thought long atrophied. I wonder if anyone save I will ever read them.

Aloysia opened in her new show tonight. I have just come from the theater. She wanted me to join the supper Stahlbaum is giving the company, but I declined with thanks—grateful that I was in a position to decline. Time was that I should have leaped at the invitation but I no longer need to share her with others.

Her part suits her—Norton has given her fully two-thirds of the lines and she trails languid sensuality across the stage to her heart's content. I noticed that she used that trick with the mouth she first developed for my benefit. It was lost on the rabble . . .

**E**LEVEN P. M., Thursday, May ninth, 1937.

*Item:* June Sims hangs on her husband's arm as they exit from the Audubon Theatre. Her eyes sparkle

with happiness. She sighs tremulously. Then, "Johnny—maybe we'd better call up and see if Junior is all right before we go eat."

*Item:* Anita Harrison-Smith peers over the shoulder of her black-coated dance partner with narrowed eyes. The florid-faced heavy man in the alcove they are just passing is her husband. His companion is Rex Cranston, president of the A. P. & C.

Without hearing she knows their talk is of debentures, temporary reactions, resistance points on Cumulative Index graphs. Howard Harrison-Smith has forgotten Anita exists, will remain oblivious of her till she comes for him to take her home.

Her small red lips set in a firmer line. He has a long wait ahead of him tonight.

*Item:* Aloysia Morne lets her ermine cape slide into Felix Hammond's deft hands. He bends and kisses her where a shoulder no less white than the snowy fur melts into the perfect column of her neck. She turns with studied grace and her throaty voice reproduces the deepest note of a 'cello.

"Do you know, Felix, this lovely place of yours is more home to me than my own so-grand rooms." Hammond smiles thinly and does not answer.

*Item:* In the dim light of a decrepit pier jutting into the Hudson Professor Henry Lanson, more than ever like a gigantic larva, putters about a grotesque combination of steel rods and glittering lenticular copper bowls out of which a brass cylinder points telescopelike at the zenith.

An arm-thick cable crawls over the pier's frayed boards and coils over their edge to the water. Lanson turns and checks connections on another smaller machine.

Far across the Hudson's black surface loom the Palisades. A dash of yellow luminance zigzags against their ebony curtain, a trolley climbing to an amusement park whose

lights are an arabesque of gold against the overcast sky.

To the right the cables of George Washington Bridge dip, twin catenaries of dotted light, and rise again. A red spark and a green one are the apices of moiré chromatic ribbons, rippling across the water to the pier head from the deeper shadow of an army launch.

Braced vertically, five feet behind the pier head, is a white-washed steel plate. This is the target for the automatic rifle that will be fired from that bobbing launch as a first trial of the Lanson Screen's efficacy.

Other tests will follow, later. But General Thompson will not yet chance firing artillery into Manhattan.

Henry Lanson calls in his voice without resonance, "Ready, General. Ten minutes for the first try."

From across the water Thompson snaps, "Ready. Go ahead."

Lanson lumbers back to his machine, thrusts at a lever. There is no sound, no vibration. Suddenly the river, the Palisades, disappear. The amusement park is gone, the inverted necklaces of pearly light that mark the bridge cables. There is no sky. Lanson looks at his wristwatch.

"Ten minutes." He chuckles. "He couldn't get through in ten thousand years."

He is very sure of himself, this man. But perhaps there is a minute residuum of doubt in his mind. After all he has never experimented with so vast an extension of his invention's power. He thuds to the steel target, puts one doughy paw against it, leans out to view its riverward surface. Will there be any flecks of black on it to show the impact of the bullets that are being fired at it?

Is he warned by a sound, a creak?

One cannot know. At any rate he is too obese, too ponderous to avoid catastrophe. Under his leaning weight the steel plate rips from flimsy braces—falls.

Its edge thuds against the physi-

cist's head, knocks him down, crushes his skull.

Professor Henry Lanson's brain, and its secrets, are a smear of dead protoplasm mixed with shattered bone and viscous blood.

**E**LEVEN - twenty - eight P. M., Thursday, May ninth, 1937.

The lights are dim in Foo Kong's pseudo-Oriental establishment. John Sims spoons sugar into a hot teapot.

"I'm going to make a lawyer out of Junior," he says slowly. "He'll go to Dartmouth for his academic course and then to Harvard. He won't have to start working right out of high school like I did."

John is reminded of the days before June belonged to him by the setting, by the dreamy light in her eyes.

"Let's walk down Broadway," he says, "when we get through here." That's what they used to do when all the glittering things in the store windows did not seem quite as unattainable as they did now.

"No, Johnny. I want to go home. I have a queer feeling there's something wrong. Mother isn't so young any more and she's forgotten what to do if a child is croupy or anything."

"Take me home, hon."

"Oh, all right." Petulantly. "It's just like you to spoil things . . ."

Anita Harrison-Smith slips out of the side door of the old Gellert Mansion on East Sixty-first Street. She signals a taxi.

"Pier Fifty-seven." Her violet eyes are deep dark pools and a visible pulse throbs in her temple.

Nobody looks at the sky. Nobody ever looks at the sky in New York. Nobody knows the sky has suddenly gone black, fathomless.

Later—"Nita!"

"Ted!"

"You *did* come! Here, driver, what's the fare?"

The cab circles in Fifteenth Street, vanishes eastward. Van Norden



takes the woman's arm.

"Have any trouble getting away?"

"No." She is quivering. "Hurry, darling. Let's get on board before anyone sees us."

"There's some trouble. Fog or something. The pier doors are closed but the officials say they'll be open again directly. They won't sail without us."

"Look, Ted, it is a heavy fog. Why, you can't see the river from here. Even the other end of the ship is hidden. But there isn't any haze here. Queer. The ship seems to be cut in half. It's quite distinct up to a certain point, then there just isn't anything more. It's black, not grey as fog ought to be."

"Let's go in that little lunchwagon till we can get aboard. Nobody will look for us in there."

"Let's. I'm afraid, Ted. I'm terribly afraid."

Nobody looks at the sky except General Darius Thompson, bobbing in a little launch on the Hudson. He is staring at vacancy where New York had been a quarter hour before. Up the river the cables of the great Bridge come out of nothingness, dip and rise to the western shore.

Toward the Bay there is nothing to show where the metropolis should be. No light, no color—nothing. Sheer emptiness. He looks at the radiant figures on his watch once more.

"Wonder what's keeping the old fool," he growls. "He should have dissipated the screen five minutes ago."

The night is warm but General Thompson shivers suddenly. An appalling speculation beats at his mind but he will not acknowledge it. He dares not.

A hundred yards from Thompson, in another space, a device of steel and copper and brass stands quiescent over the unmoving body of the one man who knew its secret.

Into the dim recesses of the army

pier a dull hum penetrates, the voice of a million people going about their nightly pursuits, unaware, as yet, of doom.

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## CHAPTER III

1997

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IN HIS cubicle on the hundred and ninetieth floor of New York University's Physics Building Howard Cranston watched the moving needle of his Merton Calculator with narrowed eyes. If the graph that was slowly tracing itself on the result-sheet took the expected form a problem that had taxed the ingenuity of the world's scientists for sixty years would be solved at last.

The lanky young physicist could not know it but the electrically operated "brain" was repeating in thirty minutes calculations it had taken Henry Lanson three years to perform two generations before. His own contribution had been only an idea and knowledge of the proper factors to feed into the machine.

A red line curved on the coordinate sheet, met a previously drawn blue one. A bell tinkled and there was silence in the room.

Breath came from between Cranston's lips in a long sigh. Curiously he felt no elation.

He crossed the room slowly and looked out through the glassite-covered aperture in the south wall. Just below elevated highways were a tangled maze in the afternoon sun and helicopters danced like a cloud of weaving midges. But Cranston neither heard nor saw them. His gaze was fixed farther away, toward where a curious cloud humped against the horizon, a cloud that was a challenging pile of vacancy—something that existed, that occupied space, yet was nothing.

Beyond it he could see the shim-

mering surface of New York Bay and rising from it a tall white shaft. At the apex of that shaft a colossal figure faced him. It was a gigantic woman of bronze, her head bowed, her hands pressed to her heavy breasts that agonized in frustration. The Universal Mother stood in eternal mourning over the visible but unseen grave of millions.

"It might be dangerous," Harold Cranston muttered. "The gases of the decomposed bodies—there was no way for them to escape. Before I start building the machine I must find out. Carl Langdon will know."

He turned away. "But first I'll draw it up. It's simple enough—will take less than a week to build."

The design that presently took pictured form under Harold Cranston's flying fingers was strangely like that which 60 years before Henry Lanson had called his B machine. But there was a difference. This one could be used from outside the Screen.

With the aid of this, by expanding the radius to include the original barrier, it would be a simple matter to destroy the hemiobloid of impenetrable force that was a city's tomb, to release the force which Lanson had set up.

Rand Barndon's flivver-plane settled before a graceful small structure of metal and glass. He swung his rather squat body out of the fuselage, crunched up the gravel path.

The door opened, irislike, as he stepped into the beam of the photoray. Somewhere inside a deep-toned gong sounded and tiny pattering feet made running sound. "Daddy! Daddy's home!"

Blond ringlets were an aureole around tiny Rob's chubby face. The father bent to him, tossed him in the air, caught him dexterously. Ruth Barndon appeared, taller than her husband, her countenance a maturer more-feminine replica of the boys. Rob was a warm bundle against her breasts as her lips met Rand's.

"You're late, hon. Supper's been ready twenty minutes."

"I know. We were talking about what they found down there." He gestured vaguely to the south. "One of the fellows flew down last night. They wouldn't let him land. But he saw enough, hovering on the five-thousand-foot level, to keep him awake all night."

Ruth paled, shuddered. "What an awful thing it must have been. You know, nobody ever thought much about it. The cloud has been there all our lives and it really didn't seem to mean anything. But seeing all those buildings where people just like us once lived and worked, seeing those—"

"Afterward, dear." Ruth caught the signal of the man's eyes to the quietly listening child and stopped. "I'm hungry. Let's get going."

THE soft glow of artificial daylight in the Barndon living room is reflected cozily from its walls of iridescent metal. Rand stretches himself, yawns. "What's on tap tonight, hon?"

"We're staying home for a change."

"I thought this was Matilda's night."

"It is. But Mrs. Carter asked me to change with her. She had something on. And I would rather stay home. There's a new play by Stan-court. I think they call it 'Alone with Love.' Fred Hamlin is taking the lead."

"That gigolo! I can't see what you women find in him!"

"Rand! That's just a pose. You know darn well you turn him on every time."

"Oh, all right. But let's get the magazine viewcast first. They always have something interesting." He crosses the room, touches an ornamental convolution on the wall. A panel slides noiselessly sideward, revealing a white screen. A switch clicks, the room dims, the screen



glows with an inner light. Rand twirls a knob.

The wall-screen becomes half of an oval room, hung with grey draperies, gray-carpeted. There is a small table in the room, behind it show the legs and back of a chair. Like the furniture in the Barndon's own place, table and chair are of lacquered metal but these are grey.

The drapes part, a tall man comes through. His face is long, pinched, his blond hair bristles straight up from his scalp, his brown eyes are grave. The impact of a strong personality reaches out from the televised image, vibrant with a stagey dominance even over the miles of space intervening between actuality and reproduction.

"Oh, it's Grant Lowndes," Ruth breathes. "I love him."

"Shhh." Barndon is intent. "Shhh!"

The Radio Commission's premier reader moves with practised grace. An adept at building up interest in trivialities by pantomimed portentousness, Lowndes is weaving a spell about his far-flung audience that will assure him concentrated attention.

As he sinks into the seat his eyes stare from the screen with hypnotic penetration. He places a book on the table before him. Its covers are of tooled leather but there is a smudge of green mould across them concealing the design. He opens it.

The pages are yellow, frayed-edged. Faded handwriting is visible, minuscular. An old diary, perhaps, picked up from some dusty second-hand display.

"Good evening, friends." His voice is mellow, warming, vibrant with a peculiar tensity. Ruth's tiny, stifled gasp is a tribute to its art. "The manufacturers of General Flyers Helioplanes have honored me tonight with a great privilege and a sad task.

"I bring to you a voice from the past, a voice long silent, speech from a throat long mouldered into dust,

thoughts from a brain whose very molecules are one with the snows of yesteryear. I bring to you the palpitant living agony of the greatest catastrophe the world has ever known." His eyes drop to the volume on the lectern and his slim white hand presses down upon its face.

"My colleagues of the viewcast service have informed you of the rending of the veil that sixty-two years ago cut off Manhattan Island from the world. They have brought into your homes the awful vision of dead buildings, of dead streets strewn with twisted skeletons.

"You have, I am sure, tried to picture what must have happened there in the tragic days till eternal silence fell and the entombed city had become a vast necropolis. Today, my friends, the searchers found an account of one man's experience, a painstakingly written chronicle of that time. General Flyers is sponsoring the presentation to you of this human, pitiful tale. I will quote from the diary."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DOOM WITHIN

MAY 9, Thursday: It is four in the morning. Aloysia came here with me from the theatre . . . I have just returned from escorting her to the place where she resides. She does not call it home—that name she reserves for these rooms.

"Home, Felix," she said, "is the place where happiness dwells." I recognized that—it is a line from one of her earlier appearances. Her mind is a blotter, seizing the thoughts, the ideas, the mental images of others and becoming impregnated with them. No—molding itself to them. Perhaps that is the secret of her arts—dramatic and—amatory.

I am restless, uneasy. There is a peculiar feeling in the air, a vague sense of impending catastrophe. Even the recollection of the past few hours with her does not drive it away . . .

I thought music might fit my mood. But the radio is out of gear. Tonight nothing but silence. Strangely enough the police talk is roaring in. There seems to be some trouble along the waterfront . . .

It ought to be getting close to dawn but it is still pitch dark outside. There isn't any breeze. The sky is absolutely black. I have never seen anything like it in New York. Clouds at night always reflect the glow of the city lights. And if there are no clouds there should be stars, a moon. Can there be a storm coming down on the big city—a tornado? That would explain the way I feel.

May 10, Friday: There has been no daylight today. The only illumination is artificial. Somehow that seems the worst of what has happened to the city. For something has happened. Manhattan is surrounded by an impenetrable barrier. Nobody, nothing can get in or out. There have been no trains at Grand Central or Penn Station, the subway is operating only within the borders of Manhattan Island.

I have been driving around with Aloysia all day. In spite of the darkness things went on very much as usual in the morning, children went to school, toilers to their work. It dawned only gradually that more than half the staffs in offices and stores had not shown up—those who do not live in Manhattan.

At noon the newspapers came out with scare headlines. Every bridge out of the city is closed off by the veil of—what can I call it? Every pier. A cover has shut down over us as if Manhattan were a platter on which a planked steak is being brought from the kitchen of the Ritz-Plaza. Even the telephone and telegraph have been affected.

By three in the afternoon the whole city was in the streets. My car was forced to move at a crawl. There was no sign of fear though. The general consensus was that the phenomenon was something thrilling, a welcome break in the humdrum of daily existence.

The mayor's proclamation in the newspapers and over the few radio stations located within the city seemed quite superfluous. He urged the people to be calm. Whatever it was that had shut us in was only temporary, it would vanish of itself or a way would be found to get rid of it.

He has appointed a committee of scientists from Columbia and the City Colleges to investigate and make plans. The best of them all, however, is unavailable—Henry Lanson. He was found crushed to death on a Hudson River pier, killed in some obscure experiment.

Aloysia left me in time for the evening performance. The theaters and movie houses are crowded—they have had the best day in their history.

At ten o'clock tonight I went to take a drink of water. None ran from the tap. I called the superintendent and he said the mains had been shut off. There was no longer any pressure. Police orders are that water is to be used only for drinking and cooking.

It is being pumped from the main by fire engines stationed at the hydrants and a rationing system has been devised. I have two or three cases of Perrier—they should be sufficient for my needs till this thing is over. There is plenty of wine and Scotch but I have no desire for alcohol.

MAY 11, Saturday: The darkness still continues. No milk was delivered this morning. Prices for food have begun to go up. There is very little fresh meat to be had, practically no vegetables or fruits. Evapo-



rated milk is being sold at a dollar a can. I am afraid the children are going to suffer a great deal.

May 12, Sunday: Church was packed. There have been several riots in the poorer sections of the city. Grocery stores raided, a warehouse gutted. The militia has been called out and all stocks of food taken over by the authorities for rationing.

Aloysia has just appeared, bag and baggage. She says she feels safe only here. I am going out to see what is going on.

Two P. M.: There is no longer any water in the system. The lakes in Central Park are being emptied, the fluid taken to breweries and distilleries nearby, where the water is being filtered and chlorinated. The little thus obtained and canned fruit juices furnish the only drink for children. Adults are drinking beer and wine.

My car was stopped by a detail of National Guardsmen in uniform. No gasoline engines are to be run any longer. There is no escape for the carbon monoxide fumes being generated, and they are poisoning the atmosphere. There already have been several deaths from this cause.

A fire started in an apartment house on Third Avenue. It was extinguished by chemicals. I wonder how long that will be efficacious?

I thought I was fairly well stocked up for at least a week. But with Aloysia here, her maid and my own man, my stock of food and drinkables is rapidly disappearing. For the first time I have sent Jarvis out to the food depots with an affidavit setting forth the size of my "family," my residence, etc. I understand that each adult is being allotted one can of meat or vegetables and one pint of water per day.

Three P. M.: All house lights have been turned off to conserve coal. I am writing by candle. Street lighting is still maintained. There has been no gas since the Darkness fell,

the plant being in Astoria.

As my own kitchen has an electric range this did not impress me, but I understand those not so taken care of have been displaying remarkable ingenuity. Several families upended electric laundry irons and used those as grills. That is ended now. However, there is so little to cook that the lack of heat hardly brings added hardship.

Jarvis has not yet returned.

Midnight: From my window I can overlook quite a large portion of the city. A vast black pall rests over us, relieved only by the network of glowing lamps outlining the streets. Even these seem to be growing dimmer.

My valet, Jarvis, is still among the missing. He has been with me for ten years. I thought him loyal, honest. He *was* honest with respect to money. I have trusted him with large sums and never found him faithless. But money is worth nothing today, while food . . .

Stress reveals the inner nature of the human animal. I met the Harrison-Smiths today, walking along Park Avenue in the foreboding restlessness that is keeping all New York on the sidewalks.

The usually iron-visaged banker presented a countenance whose color matched the clammy hue of a dead fish's belly. His heavy jowls were dewlaps quivering with fear. Even while we talked his eyes clung to his wife, who was erect, a bright white flame in the Darkness.

Her eyes were answering the appeal in his. She had strength enough for both and was keeping him from collapse by sheer silent will. The gossips this winter were buzzing about Anita and Ted Van Norden, the wastrel who reminds me so much of my own youth. There could have been little if any truth in the rumors.

May 13, Monday, Noon: I went out at five this morning to take my place in the long line at the food station. I have just returned with

my booty. One can of sardines and a six-ounce bottle of soda—to maintain three adults twenty-four hours! On my way back I saw a man, well-dressed, chasing an alley cat. He caught it, killed it with a blow of his fist and stuffed it in a pocket.

The air is foul with stench. A white hearse passed me, being pushed by men on foot. Someone told me that Central Park is being used as a burying ground.

I STOPPED to watch the passing hearse near a National Guardsman, a slim young chap whose uniform did not fit him very well. He spoke to me. "That's the worst of this thing, sir, what it's doing to children." Under his helmet his eyes were pits of somber fire.

"Just think of the babies without milk. The canned stuff gave out today. My own kid is sick in bed, he can't stand the junk we've been giving him. June—that's my wife—is clean frantic."

I wanted to comfort him but what was there to say? "How old is your youngster?" I asked.

"Junior is two—and a swell brat! You ought to hear him talk a mile a minute. He's going to be a lawyer when he grows up."

I listened to him for awhile, then made some excuse and got away. I had to or he would have seen that my eyes were wet.

Later: Aloysia has slept all day. All the windows in the apartment are open but the air is heavy, stifling. It is difficult to move, to breathe. The shell that encloses us is immense but eventually the oxygen in the enclosed air must be used up. Then what?

Unless relief comes soon death will be beforehand, the mass death of all the teeming population of this island. One must face that. Just what form will it take? Starvation, thirst, asphyxiation? Queer—I, who have so often babbled of the futility of life, do not want to die.

It is—unpleasant—to contemplate utter extinction, the absolute end of self. I wish I believed in immortality, in some sort of future life. Even to burn eternally in hell would be better than simply—to stop.

There is a red glow to the south. Is it a thinning of the darkness?

The city seems hushed with all traffic noise stopped. But another sound has replaced it—a high-pitched murmur, not loud but omnipresent, insistent. I have just realized what it is. Children crying—thousands of them, hundreds of thousands. Hungry children—thirsty children.

May 14, Tuesday: The clock says it is morning. It is not dark outside any more. A red light suffuses the scene, the light of the gigantic flame that has enveloped all the lower end of the Island. There is no wind. The conflagration is spreading very slowly but it is coming inexorably.

Overhead are vast rolling billows of smoke, edged with scarlet glare. Below there is a turbulent sea of human beings. The roar of the fire, pent-in and reverberant, mingles with the crash of breaking glass, the rattle of rifle shots, a growling animal-like sound that is the voice of the mob.

They are engaged in a carnival of destruction, a blind mad venting of protest against the doom that has overtaken them.

I had a dog once that was run over by some fool in a truck. When I went to pick it up it snarled and sank its teeth in my hand. That is like those people down there. They do not know what has hurt them but they must hurt someone in return.

Where they find the strength to fight I do not know. I can scarcely move. My tongue fills my mouth. It is almost impossible to breathe.

Aloysia has just called me. It was the ghost of a word, her "Felix." In a moment I shall go in to her and lie down beside her.



Grant Lowndes looks up from the book. "That is all," he says simply. "In an inner room of the apartment where this was found the searchers discovered two skeletons on the mouldering ruin of a bed, a man's and a woman's.

"General Flyers bids you good night. I shall be with you again at this same hour on Friday."

He turns and goes slowly out through the grey curtains. The diary remains on the little gray table. Shadows close in from the edges of the screen, concentrating light within their contracting circle. The book is the last thing visible. That too is gone.

There is silence in the living-room for a long minute. Rand Barndon reaches to the radiovisor switch,

clicks it off. The screen is blankly white in the glow of the room light.

"You know," Barndon says slowly. "The city wasn't all burned up. Guess the fire burned up all the oxygen and put itself out. That was what killed the people too."

Ruth sighs tremulously. "Rand, I was thinking about that one thing he said, about that soldier that was worried about his sick little boy. Just think if anything like that were to happen to our Rob."

"Say, I noticed that too. The fellow had a good idea. That's what we're going to make of the kid, a lawyer. Big money and not too much hard work. We'll send him to Dartmouth first, then to Harvard. A fellow was telling me they've got the best law school in the country."



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# Three Wise Men

By LLOYD ARTHUR ESHBACH

*They looked like gnomes  
and they seemed to know  
just about everything, but—*

**N**OW listen, Sergeant, I've got some information that you really ought to get. I guess I'd be better off if I kept my mouth

shut but—well, this Doctor Stoner you're holding is innocent. He didn't murder those three freaks. They just died.

There's a lot of this case that you don't understand, Sergeant. Doc Stoner and I are the only ones who know the inside story. And he won't talk . . .

*Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published  
in Nov. 1939 Startling Stories*



Who, me? My name's Tom Dorion. Age thirty-two. I'm a freak-hunter for the Empire Circus combine—you know, the outfit that bought out Ringling and Barnum . . .

Oh—I just keep hunting up freaks for the shows. Whenever the boss gets a lead on something new and big for the midways he sends me out to sign 'em up. Between times I keep roving, scouting for material . . .

Where do I cut in on this case? That's what I want to tell you. It's a long story and I'm not much of a hand at talking—but here goes. About two months back I'd just returned from Borneo with a two-headed snake and a Dyak boy with a pair of singing parakeets when the big boss—that's Joe Wallace—called me into his office.

I could see right off that he didn't feel like patting me on the back and handing me a cigar. Then, sudden-like, he jammed a newspaper into my hand and pointed to a headline.

"Look!" he yelled. "Somewhere out on Long Island are three freaks—little guys with big heads—and I want them for my shows! They're gettin' a swell build-up. An' you're gonna sign 'em—or else!"

I didn't like that "or else," but I didn't say so. I just looked at the article. Maybe you read it, too, Sergeant—'most everybody did, I guess. Anyway, I have the clipping here and if you don't mind, I'll sort of skim over 'em, just to refresh your memory.

### THREE WISE MEN COME OUT OF FUTURE

Ambassadors From Tomorrow Appear  
at Long Island House Party

### SCIENTISTS ASTOUNDED

Long Island City, July 9—A house party at the country estate of Oliver P. Mawson, millionaire automobile manufacturer, came to an abrupt and thrilling termination last night with the appearance of three uninvited guests.

With more than two hundred famous people present, including leading figures in artistic, scientific and financial circles, the party had reached its height at about 2 a. m., when a terrific explosion shook the sumptuous Mawson mansion. Shouts were heard from the lawn outside and excited guests streamed into the night.

A startling spectacle greeted them. The entire western sky was lit up by a strange greenish light, rising from a little hill a hundred yards away. And in that unearthly glow they saw a huge polished metal cylinder sprawled on the hillside, its lower end twisted and torn by the explosion which had gouged and blasted the hilltop, uprooting several young trees.

As the guests reached the hill they heard sounds within the metal cylinder and one after another three strange small men crawled out. Almost identical in appearance, they were little more than four feet in height and their bodies were covered only by white sleeveless shirts of some soft silky material, and flaring white shorts. They seemed amazingly thin and fragile though tanned a golden brown. Their heads, completely bald, were enormous, fully twice the size of normal human heads. And their faces, thin almost to the point of emaciation, were old and wrinkled with deeply shrunken eyes and thin indrawn lips, the whole somehow grotesquely out of proportion with their huge heads.

### SCIENTIST INTERVIEWED

In an interview Roger St. John, noted astronomer and writer, stated: "I never saw a more startling spectacle. That green glow which seemed to emanate from the very earth of the hilltop cloaked those three little men with an air of the unearthly. It stunned us. There was something almost juvenile in their faces, yet with it was something so incredibly ancient that—well, it marked them as creatures of another world—or time!

"It seemed almost as though they had stepped from the pages of a Wellsian fantasy—men from the future. When one of them spoke his voice was peculiarly flat and bore an indescribable accent.

"A slight miscalculation, Lon,' he said, 'doubtless due to the changing contour of the Terrestrial surface. We should have raised our supports two feet higher.'

"Fortunate that our miscalculation had no more regrettable result than the loss of our Time-drive," replied the second little man dryly.

"The third waved a hand toward us and said in the same flat voice: 'We have an audience, friends.' And the three walked slowly down the hillside."

#### COME OUT OF FUTURE

After the excited throng had escorted the strange visitors into the great ballroom of Mawson Manor and subsided to a point where intelligent conversation could be carried on the three introduced themselves as "Lon St-228-86," "Ander Cw-741-22," and "Ken Mb-390-54," visitors from the Forty-third Century, A. D., or the year 2351, New Era. They had come back into the past, so they said, to view at first hand what their history indicated was the first year of the New Era—this very year.

There followed an animated discussion, during which the visitors were dubbed "The Three Wise Men," for they revealed a startling knowledge about everything. The effect of this discovery was startling . . .

What's that, Sarge? . . . Well, okay. Anyway, maybe it gives you an idea how I felt when I looked at Joe Wallace after I'd finished reading the thing. I opened my mouth—

"Don't say it, Derion," he snapped. "I'm dumb enough to give you credit for having a little brains—an' if you try to tell me you're fallin' for this time-travelin' bunk I'm liable to get sore."

"You scram over to that Mawson guy's joint an' stay there till things break. Sooner or later the bottom'll fall outa the story these three big-headed freaks are dishing up an' when it does I want you there to sign 'em!'"

I didn't waste much time getting out to Mawson's little fifty-acre estate on Long Island but getting inside was something else. A faked reporter's card didn't work. Neither did a black bag, a pair of spectacles and a doctor's front. So—well, I got in but I was glad there didn't happen to be any police around.

AFTER I brushed the dust off my soup-and-fish there wasn't any one could tell me from the other guests. When I first saw those

three little men—well, it was an experience. The papers hadn't stretched things a bit. Boy, I figured, if Joe Wallace could get them we sure had three world-beaters on our hands.

This guy Mawson had sort of set himself up as proud father and legal guardian of the Three—and let me tell you he did things right. Some of those feeds of his would set you back twenty bucks in a Manhattan hash house.

The second day Mawson arranged an interview with the press. Never saw such a mob of reporters before or since. The scientists were there and—well, when the lid blew off and the physics, astronomy, higher mathematics, biology and all the rest of that bunk started flying around sort of casual-like the Three Wise Men got to telling the scientific big shots where to head in. Those little guys knew everything!

There was one egg there, a French scientist, who thought he was pretty hot stuff. Seems he'd written a book called "Atoms, Protons and Positrons, the Building Blocks of the Universe." The way he looked at it there was nothing more to be said.

He mentioned his work, and Ander—he was the only one of the Three with a sense of humor—started spouting a chapter of the book, word for word! Just sat there looking at nothing while the syllables rolled out in that flat hollow voice.

I could see the Frenchman swelling up like a balloon—not thinking of the brains this little man had but of how important his work was to be remembered two thousand years in the future.

Then Ander said sort of soft and gentle, "We preserve some of the more absurd of the ancient writings as entertainment for the children. A counterpart, I should say, of your fairy tales."

When the reporters left at the



end of three or four hours the Three Wise Men were headed for the biggest splash of publicity that ever hit anybody. I still remember some of those headlines.

There were pictures by the dozens, pictures of the Three, pictures of their machine—what was left of it after the souvenir hunters got through with it.

Funny, but there was one big angle that everybody'd overlooked at first. But when it struck it socked about forty million people all at once. If these little birds had come out of the future they must know some history that hadn't happened as yet!

And you know, Sarge, there's nothing a man wouldn't give to know what's going to break tomorrow or the next day. Think how swell it would be for a guy playing the market! And these Three with their super-memories—well, it looked like a natural.

About forty million phone calls, telegrams and letters struck Mawson Manor at the same time. Could the Three Wise Men tell the history of the future? They could and would!

Oliver P. Mawson arranged it. He's a big fat man about six-feet-two, with round red cheeks like a pair of apples and eyes as bright as two blue marbles—and he's just as hard. Worked his way up from a laborer in an auto plant to become one of the richest men in the country.

With Mawson pulling the strings the Three Wise Men were scheduled for a big television broadcast on a world hook-up. That was just a few months before the Presidential election, and the Three crowded the candidates right off the air waves.

**A**S FOR the broadcast—well, everybody had heard of the Three, had read what they had said—and now they could see them and hear them. And they said plenty. They told of the big yellow war of

seventy years from now.

They told—but I guess you heard the broadcast. About this New Era business and this year being the first of the New Era, the beginning of a slow unbroken march toward genuine civilization. And they said how a man by the name of Doctor Michel Stoner would be the one to take the first big step forward. Michel Stoner, the next President of the United States, they said.

Let me tell you, Sarge, that rocked the great American public back on their heels. Who was Doctor Michel Stoner? Nobody'd ever heard of him. Yet the Three said he was going to be the next President!

The papers—you remember, Sarge—played it up big. Michel Stoner, the Man of Destiny! *Who* was he? *Where* was he?

So they started hunting for Michel Stoner, M. D. Some reporter found out that about twenty-five years ago he'd practised medicine in a little Pennsylvania town and that he'd dropped that to take over a professor's chair in a college so small they didn't even have a paid football team—and that was all. He'd simply disappeared.

The search went on until at last they found him in a little four-room cabin in the Massachusetts hills about a hundred miles from nowhere. Didn't even have a radio. Hadn't seen a newspaper in two months. Nobody around there knew anything about him except that about once every three months or so he drove out of the hills in a dilapidated flivver to buy gasoline, food and books.

The books they remembered most, 'cause there was always a lot of them waiting in the Post Office marked M. Stoner, General Delivery. I think it was through the publishers he was finally located.

Well, if nobody knew anything about him at first it didn't take them long to find out. Oliver P. himself drove up there in a plati-

num-plated Rolls and carried him back to Mawson Manor. And of course there was another big world broadcast with Mawson the master of ceremonies. The Three Wise Men were there with bells on. And Stoner—well, Sarge, if you saw and heard that broadcast you'll have to admit he made some impression.

I don't care if you *do* have him behind the bars! I told you he's innocent—and I'm here to prove it to you. I have another clipping . . .

Now wait a minute, Sarge—just this one. This'll be the last one I'll read. You see, I make scrap books of the things I'm interested in—helps me keep a record. Listen!

#### WORLD BROADCAST STARTLES VAST AUDIENCE

Dr. Michel Stoner Makes Amazing  
Impression

#### WILL RUN FOR OFFICE

New York City, Aug. 22—Dr. Michel Stoner, the recluse from the Massachusetts hills, will be an independent candidate in the forthcoming Presidential election. He revealed that last night after a world television broadcast in which he proved to be one of the most impressive figures ever to reach the telescreens.

Despite his earlier decision to leave politics to others Dr. Stoner found the American public so overwhelmingly insistent on his running for office that he felt impelled to yield to their demands.

Dr. Stoner faced an audience burning with curiosity to see the man mentioned by the Three Wise Men as the first President of the New Era. Of average height and rather slender in build he is at once a figure of quiet power, impressive dignity, and magnetic personality.

His head is crowned with a mass of snow-white hair. And his voice—never has such a resonant voice borne so much wisdom on the one hand and beauty of diction on the other. In Dr. Michel Stoner America has discovered a genius.

For the past twenty years Doctor Stoner has been engaged in the writing of a voluminous and comprehensive work tentatively entitled "Man and the Way of Man."

In his manuscript, already more

than two million words in length, Doctor Stoner has discussed in full detail the development of Man since the dawn of reason up to the present and into the future. If the numerous quotations from his work are an indication he possesses a rare insight into human behavior and character.

#### NEW ERA DAWNING

"Man," he says, "has reached the threshold of vast new truths. The doors of knowledge are swinging aside. Old thoughts and methods of thinking are passing away to be displaced by a newer more rational consciousness. Long-standing fears, disorders and superstitions are yielding to an imposing array of new knowledge like a tidal wave sweeping everything before it. And Man rides like foam on its crest!

"A New Era is dawning, a new age when all mankind will be welded into one vast spiritual whole, one tremendous world community in which the term 'war' will have no meaning. Someone with cosmic understanding, someone in whom the world consciousness has awakened into fullness of life, will lead you. But it should be someone wiser far than I—someone whose name I do not yet know."

Yeah, Sarge, I suppose that is enough. Seems like everybody else thought so too, for it was only about ten minutes after he left the air that demands started pouring in for him to run for President.

What a howl went up in certain quarters when the Doc started his campaign. After all this guy's speeches were the kind that got practically anything they asked for and with the Three Wise Men on his side it looked like a sure thing for the dark horse.

The Democrats kicked because they figured they had had the thing in the bag. And the Republicans kicked because they thought—or at least hoped—that this time they'd be able to upset the mule.

**B**UT the howls were only straws in a cyclone. No one paid much attention to the other candidates. A blind man could see that Stoner was slated to go in with the biggest



majority in history. What was the use in voting against a man who, future records showed, had been elected? And with the Three for him and Mawson's millions behind him—well, Sarge, it was some set-up.

I didn't see much of the three big-shots those days nor much of Stoner or Mawson either. They still made the big Long Island mansion their headquarters but they were too busy to spend much time with a flock of perpetual house guests.

I figure they'd have given us our walking papers if it hadn't been for the scientists but they made company for the Three and good copy for the tabloids. Anyway, I was in and enjoying it.

But after awhile my conscience started working. I remembered Joe Wallace and here I was, swimming and playing tennis with a pair of swell dames, eating so much that I'd put on an average of two pounds a week and—well, I decided to get busy.

It took about a week for me to get the hang of the place. Then one night when I was playing detective I stumbled on something big. There'd been some big doings in Philadelphia—Stoner was given the keys to the burg, a big parade, speeches and everything that went with it. They'd come back to Mawson Manor all played out.

I was sliding along one of those big corridors when I heard voices—Mawson's bark, Stoner's smooth deep baritone and the flat creaking voices of the Three. And they didn't sound like they were chinning just to pass the time away.

"Get this, Stoner," I heard Mawson say and his words sort of cut like a knife, "you're not backing out! You couldn't even if I'd let you. And I'm not letting you, see! There's too much involved in this for things to topple now. So forget it."

"I can't forget it," Stoner said, as solemn as a funeral. "I'm tired of

the whole thing. I wish you'd never found me."

Then one of the Three spoke—I think it was Lon. "We're tired, too."

And he certainly sounded tired—like a guy with insomnia, who hadn't slept for months.

"Tired!" Mawson's voice cracked. "Then go to bed—get some sleep. Tomorrow you'll be over this nonsense. I've got enough to worry about without this. Got another threatening letter today—this one, I think, from the Ernisto mob. The politicians are back of 'em, I'm certain, but I can't prove it. The police—they can't do a damn' thing! And where'd we be if the Three Wise Men were kidnaped!"

I heard a door slam and I beat it down the hall—fast.

I didn't sleep so well that night. What I'd heard took heavy thinking. Stoner was tired of the whole thing. Tired of what? Of running for President? Or of being a big fake?

Then I thought of those strange big-headed little men with their young eyes and old voices and I didn't know what to think. And this talk of kidnaping—there hadn't been even a whisper about it in the papers. Big things were starting to break, and I could only wait.

I dragged through the next two days in a sort of fog, waiting for something to happen. And when I woke up on the morning of the third day it had happened all right—cracked wide open.

### THREE WISE MEN KIDNAPED!

The tabloids screamed it in the biggest headlines since the Lindbergh case. The telescreens snapped or roared it at a wholesale rate. I'd been half expecting it, yet it knocked the wind out of me.

It seemed Doctor Stoner and the Three had been returning late from a trip to the studios. Mawson had been delayed. On a lonely stretch of road they'd run out of gas—how was a mystery since the gauge registered

"full." Must've been tampered with. The chauffeur had walked back toward the last gas station they'd passed and when he'd come back car, Wise Men and Presidential candidate had disappeared.

YOU know all that, Sarge, better than I do—and you know how they found Stoner the next day, lying in the back of a car as sick as a dog, and the smell of chloroform strong enough to choke an elephant.

He told how a big sedan had pulled up and four men with tommy-guns had ordered the Three into their machine and had doped him. That was all he knew till the cops found him. And the mileage gauge had been smashed . . .

Oh, I know it's all old stuff to you but I've got to tell this in my own way. I don't want to skip anything important, see?

Well, in Mawson Manor things resembled a first-class madhouse. The big boss tore things wide open. Doctor Stoner was confined to his room, prostrated by shock.

And then the police came in droves and sort of suddenlike I got the idea that it was time for Tom Dorion to scram! I was the uninvited guest and I'd have a tough time talking myself out of this spot if the police caught up with me.

In town I hung around my room, waiting to see what would happen next. There wasn't much—just the delivery of the first ransom note demanding one million dollars for each of the Three. Letters clipped out of newspapers and pasted on a sheet of bond paper by a guy wearing gloves. No fingerprints—no nothing!

You picked up a lot of mobsters that first week, didn't you, Sarge? And you looked for a house guest who had disappeared on the day after the kidnaping, a guy nobody seemed to know much about—only you couldn't find him.

And after a little while you found out you hadn't accomplished anything. The papers made it hot for the Police Commissioner and he made it hot for everybody under him. You sweated a flock of mobsters—and it didn't mean a thing.

It was about that time that I decided I'd better get busy. Joe Wallace had told me to stick with the Three Wise Men till I'd signed 'em up for his shows and here I'd let 'em be kidnaped under my very nose.

I sort of thought things over and I got a hunch. You see, I couldn't get that little conversation between Mawson, Stoner and the Three out of my dome. So I hired a flivver and headed for the Massachusetts hills.

That little cabin of Michel Stoner's wasn't the easiest place in the world to find but I found it. I guess I was about two blocks from the place when I parked the rattling wreck I was driving and sort of crept up toward the joint. It was a nifty little hideaway.

It took me about a half an hour to cover a couple hundred yards. I didn't figure there was much danger if my hunch was right. But I couldn't be sure so I didn't take any chances. If those hardboiled boys with the hair grease and the tommy-guns were mixed up in this—well, it might not be so healthy for Tom Dorion!

But I finally got there and sort of eased my eyes up over a window sill. There they were—the Three Wise Men and nobody else. It took me just about one second to get around to the door. Let me tell you, Sarge, I felt good. This was a break. Here was my chance. If I didn't get their names on some kind of a contract it wouldn't be my fault.

When I knocked on the door and one of them answered, "Come in," some of the pep went out of me. Honest, Sarge, I never heard anything as—as lifeless as that voice. So flat and dull. Almost like I was hearing the dead talking if you get



what I mean.

There they were, sprawled out across a cot bed, hardly moving. They always were queer-looking birds but now it seemed like they were centuries old—as though they were shrinking, drying up before my eyes.

"Good morning, gentlemen," I said cheery-like. "Thought I'd stop in an' say hello."

Anders answered, and he didn't even move his head. "We are glad you came. We are so—tired. We have lived beyond our—allotted span. Soon we shall die. And it is not good to die alone."

**I**F YOU don't think that just about floored me, Sarge, you're crazy. There I was with the best attractions that ever hit the show game, practically in the palm of my hand, and they were dying!

For a second I didn't say a word, just stared from one to another. I still remember half seeing the rest of the room—a little stove with an empty frying pan on it and a coffee percolator. Rows and rows of books.

Lon pulled himself up on one elbow. "There can be no mistake," he whispered and that's all it was, a hoarse whisper. "We know we have but little time in this life. That is why we left. Doctor—Doctor Stoner arranged it though he did not realize—how it was with us. We would like to see him before—we die."

Ken, the third little man, sat up, and I could see it took a terrific effort. His eyes burned out at me like two hot coals out of two hollow pits—coals that were burning to ashes.

"We are old—so terribly old," he croaked. "Yet we are so—young. And the end is close." A thin hand pointed toward the desk. "There, in the upper drawer on that side, is a little book. Get it."

In a sort of trance I went over to the desk. I found the book.

"That explains things—which

should be known." Ken slumped back on the bed.

"Look," I said, "isn't there something I can do?" My thoughts were going around in circles but I felt I had to do something.

Ander moved his head from side to side. "No one can help us. We know. But you can get Doctor Stoner to—come here—before we pass on. There may be time—if he hurries."

I sort of slid toward the door. "Okay, okay, I'll rush," I said. "I'll get him. Just hang on."

The next thing I knew, I was hot-footing it up the winding road toward the flivver. And let me tell you I sent that old can rolling like she never rolled before. I'd passed through a little town about fifteen miles back and I headed that way with the accelerator jammed against the floorboard.

I guess I reached the place in about twenty minutes though it seemed like hours. But I got there finally and I put in a long distance call for the Mawson estate. A cop answered, I think. It didn't take him long to get Doc Stoner on the wire when I bellowed it was a matter of life or death.

I spilled the story to Stoner in a few words but he didn't even let me finish. I heard a sort of choking cry, then I heard the receiver crash on the hook. I got out of there in a hurry. I didn't want to be around when the fireworks started.

You know what happened better than I do. Stoner tearing out of the mansion like a lunatic, grabbing that big Rolls Royce of Mawson's and roaring away before anyone could even think of stopping him.

Nobody but Stoner knows what happened up to the time the cops arrived about an hour behind him. I have a good idea but it's only an idea. Anyway, when the police got there, as you know, Sarge, they found the Doctor sitting on a stump in the weed-grown garden behind

the cabin. And the cabin—it was half burned down by that time. A little later there were only smoking ashes.

And Doctor Stoner just sat there and stared. And he'd only say in a sort of dull, dry voice, "They're dead, and that's their funeral pyre. No one will ever know."

But he didn't kill 'em, Sarge. I tell you he's innocent. They just died!

Here's how I dope it out, Sarge. Oliver P. Mawson was behind the whole thing. You ought to be able to see that yourself with my telling you about that argument I heard. He got the big idea when he stumbled across Stoner's cabin while driving through the hills up there. Those three little guys with their big heads must have started his imagination working.

Huh? Sure, they were there all the time. Don't tell me you fell for that time-traveling bunk! Mawson staged the whole thing. I'll bet when you check on it you'll find he had the "time-machine" built in his automobile factories.

And, of course, since he couldn't very well fake a time-traveling engine, he had to have that explosion to destroy it. It was good publicity stuff too. Made a swell spectacle with a little chemical of some sort spilled on the ground.

**I**T WAS power he wanted—*power*! He had so much money he couldn't keep track of it and that could buy quite a bit of power—but not enough. He'd been a little guy who had worked himself up from nowhere and it had gone to his head. He wanted to be dictator of America—and he almost got what he was after!

Sure! With these fake men from the future he planned to have Stoner elected to the Presidency, with himself, of course, the power behind the throne. And a little later on, with those same Three Wise Men paving

the way he'd take over the control of the government. It was a perfect setup—only something bigger than Oliver P. stepped in.

Where'd the Three come from? That's where that little black book comes in—my ace in the hole. That's what will save Michel Stoner from the chair or the bughouse. I've got it here. It's Stoner's diary, with a daily record covering the last twenty odd years.

Of course I'll give it to you, Sarge—but you can't read shorthand, can you? I can. Listen to this—the first entry that interests us, years back—

"March third, Nineteen-hundred-thirty. Ann is dead. It was too much for her. God forgive me, but I did all a man could do. She was always so frail, and those endless hours of travail were more than she could bear. What will I do? I can hardly see the page before me.

"And those three mites, they're such pitiful little things. Their heads are enormous. Victims of hydrocephalus, obviously. I must save them—or her death will be completely futile."

I've looked up that word "hydrocephalus," Sarge. It means water on the brain. Here's what a guy named Blakeslee says about it. A lot of it is Greek to me but you'll get the general idea.

"Hydrocephalus. Fluid effusion within the cranium, giving rise to a more or less uniform stretching of the cranial bones. The sutures are obviously stretched asunder, accompanied by extreme enlargement of the forehead.

"Frequently the eyes will appear misplaced. Sometimes they look very much deeper set than normal. In other cases they look as though they were depressed as a result of the downward pressure exerted by the excess fluid upon the roof of the orbits.

"Major degrees of hydrocephalus cause such extreme enlargement of the head, coupled with such thinning



of the bones and stretching of the sutures, that the diagnosis is almost unmistakable . . ."

Here's the next important entry—

"The three boys are still alive, though that they can live at all with such inadequate treatment is a miracle. I have only canned milk and a prepared baby food and it's a poor substitute for mother's milk.

"I buried Ann out in the garden beside the stump where she liked to sit. There was nothing else to do. I can't leave my three sons while life remains in their little bodies. I've decided to try the glandular treatment advocated by Gardner for the hydrocephalic condition."

There's no use reading the entries for the next few weeks, Sarge. It was touch and go for the three boys. But here's the entry for April Twenty-second—

"The danger for Andrew, Alonzo and Kenneth is past. They seem almost normal now though they'll always have abnormally large heads. I hope their minds are not affected, a definite possibility since theirs was such a severe case. I left them alone for the first time today while I drove into town for some much needed supplies."

It goes on that way, Sarge, for about seven years. Then you begin to see Doc Stoner starting to get sort of worried. Something's wrong with his boys. Finally he writes this—

"May Nineteenth, Nineteen-hundred-thirty-seven. Lord, what a blunder! I'm a disgrace to the medical profession. To think that this could have happened to my own sons! I've noticed a strangeness for quite some time past and at last I know what it is—progeria, a glandular ailment so obscure that perhaps only a half dozen are almost unmistakable.

"I'm afraid—no, certain that this condition is the result of my treatment for the hydrocephalus. I know now that my boys will never

be normal at least physically. Mentally they seem far above average.

"Andrew is the most brilliant, though all three have truly amazing memories. Already they have read and memorized every book in my library. I'll have to buy more books. Perhaps they may develop into brilliant scientists or writers."

I looked that word "progeria" up too, Sarge, and what a time I had. Here's the little information I got—

"Progeria is primary spontaneous infantilism mingled with premature senility. Hence, with shortness of stature and other indications of infantilism there are baldness, emaciation, arteriosclerosis and general decrepitude.

"The ear lobule is absent, the nasal cartilages are conspicuous and the fingers nodose owing to the prominence of the epiphyses. Death from angina pectoris or other senile disease usually ensues in the early twenties or sooner!"

There's a lot there that I don't understand, Sarge, but I do know this—the Three Wise Men were freaks, built up by those two diseases. They looked like men from the future—or at least like some writers say they'll look. Mawson saw their possibilities, talked Stoner into showing them off—after all, Stoner was proud of their brains—and got the doctor to go into the thing himself. When he saw what it was leading to he tried to go back out but Mawson wouldn't let him. He faked the kidnaping to upset Mawson's plans.

The three boys, old men at twenty-one, died of old age. And Stoner, all broken up because his sons were dead and probably blaming himself, burned their bodies with the cabin to let them keep the little glory that was theirs.

I've spoiled that by telling you this but anyway I've saved him from the chair. Here's the diary, Sarge. There's a lot more dope in it. I guess I'd better report back to Joe Wallace.

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Bartano's arms went  
around Nona

# Earth-Venus 12

By GABRIEL WILSON

*On the sea or in the air, mutiny means violence—  
and in space, it's the ultimate horror!*

**Y**OU'VE never seen Nona Guelph?"  
"No," I said. "I never have seen the lady."

"Well, here she comes. If she isn't a beauty I'm a motor-oiler."

From the forward turtle deck, un-

der the glassite dome of the *Starlight Arrow*, I peered down to the landing stage where the arriving passengers were crowding. It was *Interplanetary Starways, Earth-Venus Voyage Twelve*.\*

\* *Starlight Arrow*... Great-New York. Earth to Grebbar, Venus August, 2036.



Nona Guelph was beautiful—tall and slender with hair like spun gold piled in a cone upon her head. A long dark cloak enveloped her as she came with armed guards from the escalator.

In the shadows of the turtle deck just beyond the blue glare of the Morrel tube-lights young Walter Wilson stood beside me. He said, "A beauty? Am I right?"

"No argument," I agreed.

As she came up the boarding incline her cloak parted, disclosing her slender form, brief kirtle of blue with gold-tasseled belt, limbs like pale pink marble. Wilson's leather jacket hid the little Banning heat-gun which he held alert in his hand.

This daughter of the President of the World Federation was surrounded by uniformed guards. Young Wilson, Federal undercover man, was an added precaution, assigned for this voyage which was taking Nona Guelph, traveling alone, to Grebbar to be guest of the young daughter of the President of the Venus Free State.

She reached the deck and Wilson stepped forward. "Miss Guelph? I am Wilson—Federated Newsgatherer."

I saw a look pass between them. The uniformed guards had remained on the dock. One secret bodyguard, as everyone knows, is more effective than ten in blatant uniform. Wilson's leather togs and the Federated Newsgatherer's insignia on his peaked cap were an effective disguise.

She knew he was her guard, of course. Her smile was gracious, even radiant. It made my heart thump as though I were an isolated tower time-keeper who had never seen a beautiful girl before.

"Federated News?" she said. "Even in space must I be interviewed?"

"I'll be generous," Wilson grinned. "Not till we pass the moons of

Venus will I ask you a question. Meet Ken Masters."

I gripped her cool slim hand. Her blue-eyed gaze roved my white-linen gold-braided uniform with the insignia of my rank striped on my sleeve.

"Third officer?" she said. "I am honored." Then her smile faded. Her hand went to Wilson's arm. Her voice was low, furtive. "That Venusian down there—see him? His name is Felah Bartano."

WE SAW him—gigantic fellow for a native of Venus. Black hair, long to the base of his neck, with a red leather thong binding his forehead in Venus fashion. He was starting up the boarding incline, a passenger on this voyage.

"Watch him, Wilson," Nona murmured. "I'm afraid of him. I have—"

"Easy!" I warned. "Eavesdroppers—"

Wilson had a detector in the palm of his hand. No hostile eavesdropping ray was upon us. But Nona abruptly added, "After the evening meal come to my deck-chair." Her gaze included me. Then, as Captain Davis approached to welcome her, she turned from us.

For a time my duties as Third Officer of the *Starlight Arrow*\* kept me busy. We left the Great-New York stage at 5 P. M. Earth E. S. T. The sun was setting at the western horizon—but it rose with

\* The *Starlight Arrow* was a cylindrical aluminum hull a hundred feet long and forty feet in diameter at its central breadth. Upon the turtle-deck a fifty-foot superstructure, ten feet high with a narrow deck space around it, housed the public rooms and the passengers' cubicles. Upon the superstructure roof was the radio room. The officers' quarters were forward and facing the bow peak was the big circular control room. Over the whole of this was the glassite dome, a convex transparent cover from stem to stem.

In the hull were the crews' quarters, the galley, pneumatic mechanisms operating the plate shifters of the hull's gravity plates, the pressure equalizers, chemical air renewers, ventilators—all the intricate mechanisms necessary to the navigation of space.

The personnel of Voyage Twelve by official records, was officers and crew 18—passengers 41—the latter the usual mixture of Earth and Venus people with a few Martians.

us as we slanted westward in our climb through the atmosphere. An hour's ascent with our rocket-tails streaming like a comet behind us—then we shut them off with the gravity plates set for Earth repulsion and the Moon to pull us on the first leg of the flight.

The usual number of passengers suffered from pressure sickness—the inevitable changes of temperature and air pressure—despite Captain Davis' skill in handling the *Arrow's* mechanism. But everything was all right once we passed the stratosphere and entered interplanetary space.

For an hour or two that evening the sunlight raked us full. Then, with course shifted, we headed for the Moon and plunged presently into Earth's conical shadow. Glorious black firmament with blazing white star-dots—the Moon a glowing white disc and Venus a blazing point of light far off to one side over our port quarter.

I did not see Nona Guelph during the dinner hour. Her cubby was in the superstructure forward, almost under the control turret, with a little segment of the side-deck under the dome roped off for her exclusive use. Nor did I see young Wilson.

The Venusian, Felah Bartano, went directly to his cubby and stayed there. But I saw him again briefly as he came to the deck to stare at the firmament through a side bulls eye—a fellow as tall as myself, thirty years old perhaps. Grey-skinned, like all Venusians, his erect, muscular form was robed in a long dark cloak—a commanding figure.

At 7 p. m., ship's routine, I was momentarily free of duty. I saw Nona come to her little deck space and seat herself in a chair. The white glaring moonlight was on the other side-deck. The shining starlight bathed the girl's blue-clad figure with a silver sheen. She saw me, beckoned me forward.

Her smile was radiant. Anyone observing us would have said that she was a young girl intrigued by my so-called handsome figure and gold-braided uniform. But her tremulous voice belied that radiant smile.

"Where is Wilson?"

I answered her smile—and as I sat in the chair beside her, suddenly I felt as though unseen eyes must be watching us. "I don't know," I murmured. "I haven't—"

Then abruptly, like a materializing apparition, Wilson arrived, coming from a nearby corridor doorway of the superstructure. He sat smilingly on the arm of my chair.

"My business is to watch you, Miss Guelph," he said softly. I saw the little detector in the palm of his hand. He said, "Tell us now what you meant."

"That man Bartano," she said hurriedly. Then she told us that when the daughter of the President of the Venus Free State had visited her in Washington last conjunction they had talked of the revolution in the Dark Country of Venus, which was threatening her father's government.

That revolution had grown into a real menace. Its leader was demanding Earth recognition of his government—an important thing, for with it would come the legal right to import munitions of war from Earth—those diabolical electronic Earth weapons which the scientists of Venus and Mars have never been able to duplicate.

"THIS man Bartano," Nona said vehemently, "I'm sure he is the same man who was watching us that day in Washington. A native of the Venus Free State—but a traitor—a spy of the Dark Country."

"You think so? Well, I'll report it to Captain Davis," I told her. "We'll —"

"Easy," Wilson said. "Now look



here, Miss Guelph—"

"And did you know," the girl added, "that on this voyage our cargo is supposed to be the usual freight—but in reality it is weapons of war for the Grebbar government to use against the Dark Country revolutionists?"

That confounded us. I knew it, of course, but that this girl should know it was startling—though reasonable enough, for she had heard it from her father.

"Well, I'm a motor-oiler!" Wilson swore. "You tell us that so openly. You're not very discrete, young lady. It's lucky no eavesdropping ray—"

Suddenly he was staring at the little detector in his palm, his jaw dropping. Wilson wasn't to blame any more than myself—the beauty of this girl had distracted us both. The needle of the detector stirred! Eavesdropping vibrations were upon us—someone was electrically listening to our murmured words!

In that shocked instant we all three sprang to our feet. Wilson had his little heat-gun in his hand.

"Someone forward," he murmured. The needle of the detector registered the direction—toward the triangle of the bow deck where, fifteen feet from us, ladder stairs led downward into one of the hull corridors. The moonlight glared on the ladder kiosk. No one was in sight there.

I went with a leap, and Wilson was after me. The blue-lit descending ladder was empty. Then suddenly, in the shadows under the kiosk, I saw a blob. It moved. Wilson's Banning gun spat its bolt of electronic heat. But I had knocked up his wrist so that the invisible stab hissed harmlessly against the metal kiosk roof with a shower of tiny red sparks and the smell of burning paint. He was being too impulsive.

In that second I had the crouching culprit by the throat. He tried

to toss his eavesdropper away but I seized it.

"What's the idea?" I demanded. "Don't you know this is illegal?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Masters. But I didn't mean any harm."

He was one of our crew, a young American-born fellow named Brown. This was his second or third voyage with *Interplanetary Starways*.

Then Wilson grabbed him. "You were listening to us?"

"Y-yes, sir." He was thoroughly frightened, white and chattering. He gasped, "I didn't mean any harm."

"Oh, you didn't? You heard what we said!"

"Yes—no, sir. You caught me too quick."

"Just curious?" Wilson said ironically. "For no reason?"

"Yes, sir."

I took a look out of the kiosk opening. On the dim side-desk Nona was standing, staring forward at where Wilson and I had vanished from her sight. There had been no alarm. The man in the control room evidently had thought nothing of our dash for the hull ladder. The forward lookout, gazing through his telescope, had not seen us.

I turned back to Wilson and his prisoner, who was gasping, "Stop, please! You're hurting me!"

"You don't want to talk, eh?" Wilson was twisting his wrist and cuffing him in the face with the Banning gun. "Well, there are short-cuts."

Wilson fumbled at the equipment belt under his shirt. The young deck-hand stared. "W-what are you going to do?" he chattered.

"Gonna hang your tongue in the middle and wag both ends."

Brown's eyes bulged as he saw the hypodermic. "You—you—"

"Your tongue will loosen all right," Wilson said grimly. "Hold him, Masters. Just a jab in his arm."

The serum went in. Within a minute the panting Brown sank to the floor-grid with Wilson kneeling beside him.

"Now—you're all right?"

"Yes—I'm all right. You said—"

"I didn't say anything. You're the one who's got to talk."

"Me? Sure. Everybody talks. Only they told me I mustn't. I said I wouldn't an' I won't. Because they said if I didn't talk I'd be rich. We'll put the passengers off on an asteroid—Serena, it's called. Its orbit is sloping out—a flat elliptic. I guess the passengers will starve—"

"Wait a minute. Let's get one thing at a time. Who told you you'd be rich?"

I STOOD for that minute or two, listening to Wilson's tense questions and Brown's babbling answers. Rambling truth but we could piece it together very easily. Nearly half our crew had been bought by the Venus revolutionists! A mutiny was impending now—the *Starlight Arrow* was to be seized by Felah Bartano—officers and loyal members of the crew to be killed.

Passengers were to be marooned, the *Arrow* taken to the Dark Country of Venus. Its cargo of scientific weapons would be invaluable to the revolutionists, who were soon to attack Grebbar. Half of our crew members were plotting this brigandage now! And among the passengers were nine armed Venusians, all capable of handling the *Arrow* under Bartano's leadership!

It was wholesale murder, awaiting only Bartano's signal!

I gasped, "Why—good Lord, Wilson—we must tell Captain Davis!"

Too late! From the kiosk doorway I saw Nona still standing, peering toward us. There was a sudden tinkle of breaking glass on the deck near her—a darkness bomb! Its liquid antichromatic gas sprang into a diffusing vapor with a puff of inky darkness, enveloping all that segment of the deck. Nona's figure vanished, blotted out in the blackness. But her scream sounded—a scream of terror, suddenly muffled

as though a hand had been clapped over her mouth.

Then hell broke loose all over the ship.

The details of what happened during that terrible half hour on the doomed *Starlight Arrow* can never be told. There is no one to tell them. For myself, I recall that I leaped into the blackness of the light-absorbing gas toward where I had heard Nona scream. But there was no one—nothing ponderable there save the solidity of the side bulls eye into which I bumped with my wild rush. The impact all but knocked the breath from me so that I stumbled and fell.

From the blackness erupted a chaos of sounds. Running footsteps, panic-stricken voices, screams of terror, screams of agony—the hiss of heat-bolts, the sizzling of electronic hand-rays. Then, above all the near and distant turmoil, the *Arrow's* danger siren suddenly was screaming—shrill ascending electrical whine, like that of a giant in anguish.

Within a second or two I was again on my feet. Wholesale murder was everywhere. I could hear it. In the control room above me there was fighting. A wildly-aimed stab of Banning heat sizzled past me, so close that I could feel its torrid radiance. Above the din came Captain Davis' voice from the control room, shouting orders—and defiance at the mutineers.

"Back, you hyenas! Down from there or I'll drill you!"

And then he was roaring, "Masters! Ken Masters! Go below! The engine room! The lower controls!"

The gas around me was dissipating a little. I could dimly see the captain on the turret balcony, a weapon in each hand. Suddenly his bulky figure slumped forward, hung for a moment over the rail—then fell and crashed almost at my feet.

"Go below—the controls!" The instinct to obey made me whirl. I



was unarmed. In the dead captain's hand was a Banning gun. I seized it. Half a dozen men dashed by me in the gloom. Friends or enemies? I could not tell. I did not fire.

It was futile to look for Nona in all this turmoil. For a second I thought I saw her—but it was Mac, the ship's surgeon. He seized me. "Ken—good Lord!"

"Ordered below!" I gasped. "Come on!"

We leaped for the little kiosk. But a heat-stab drilled Mac and he plunged to the deck. I bent over him.

"I'm—finished!" The blood of a drilled aorta gushed through the burned hole in his chest and he was gone.

At the kiosk a man plunged into me—and, friend or enemy, I drilled him and leaped over his body. Brown was there, still babbling.

I plunged down the stairs, looking for Wilson. Overhead I heard someone slam the iron door of the kiosk. The main hull corridor was like a catwalk—a narrow suspended metal grid with low rails. Doors opened into the side cubby compartments.

I stood for a moment, peering into the blue-lit gloom. The stirring air currents were fresh, of normal pressure. I could hear the swish of the circulating fluids in the double shell of the hull—the Erentz pressure-equalizers, absorbing our inner air pressure, without which the alumite hull would have exploded to send our air puffing out into the vacuum of space.

All the vessel's machinery was still working. Silence down here, with only the dim muffled sounds of the overhead turmoil floating vaguely down.

**N**O ONE here. I passed a body lying on the catwalk—a steward's. His throat was slashed. Then, as I ran toward the big central control room, I heard a soft call. "Masters!"

It was Wilson—panting, disheveled, Banning gun still in his

hand. "Masters!" He gripped me. "What became of Nona Guelph? That darkness bomb—"

"I don't know. I couldn't find her. Captain ordered us down here."

"I thought I saw someone dragging her into the kiosk. I came down. Nobody here—alive. I was wrong. She must be still on the deck."

"I've got to get to the lower control room," I gasped. "I was ordered—"

I ran, with him after me. The catwalk terminated at the control room door. It was ajar.

"I was here," Wilson panted. "Nothing. Just—"

We burst in on a blue-lit interior, twenty feet square. Hydraulic pressure tanks, levers for emergency operation of the gravity plates, dials, levers and switches were ranged in banks around the walls. Our chief engineer and his assistant should have been in charge here. They lay sprawled on the grid floor, unconscious.

"No sign of her here," Wilson said. "What's aft? I don't know the layout of this damned place. You'll have to show—"

In all the turmoil Wilson's mind was only on the girl he was hired to protect. He whirled from me as an audiphone here on the wall buzzed its shrill signal.

"I'll take it," I said. I seized it. "Hello? Ken Masters—lower controls."

It was Spellman, the radio man, calling from his tiny cubby amidships on the roof. He could see all the upper section of the vessel from there. The brigands were in full control. He gasped when I told him that only Wilson and I were alive down here.

"They've closed every hatch. Masters. You're trapped down there. They've got the decks—herded all the turret control room-passengers aft—what's left of them."

"Spellman—you send a call for help. I'll shift the plates, head us

back to Earth."

"Can't send a call—radio's smashed." Through the audiphone I heard a whizz as though a heat-bolt had sizzled up there in the radio cubby. And Spellman gasped, "Almost got me. I'm the only one left fighting. They'll—"

His voice faded. I heard his shout.

I called into the instrument, "Don't fight! Surrender—no use in getting killed."

But he did not hear me. At my side, Wilson stood tense. "They've got the ship?"

"Yes—only us."

Suddenly there was a blob moving in the blue-lit dimness of the mechanism room—a crouching man at the doorway. Wilson's gun and mine spat their heat-bolts—but too late! The man in the doorway flashed a tiny bolt of radiac-electrons. Wilson fell—electrocuted, his clothes and his flesh blackened, emitting a ghastly smoking stench. The impact knocked me sideways and my Banning gun clattered away!

Then I leaped—and the crouching man rose to hurl his empty weapon. It missed me.

We locked together, fell on the grid-floor, rolling. It was one of the new crew members—a small grey-skinned Venusian. He was no match for me. I caught his thin throat and choked him until he went limp. Then I bashed his head against one of the steel vacuum tanks until his skull cracked. With a wave of nausea I flung away the body.

In the sudden silence I stood, panting—alone in the bloody shambles of the mechanism room. The audiphone to the radio cubby still was open. I called, "Spellman! Spellman!"

I could hear vague sounds up there. Then Spellman came on. "Masters?"

"Yes! I'm here."

"Finished me. Drilled—"

"What about Nona—where is she?"

"In the turret control room. That Bartano—he's got her in the turret. I'm finished, Masters—" His gasping voice faded. I heard the thump of his falling body, then silence.

I stood panting. What could I do? Yield to these brigands—or set the gravity plates into combinations which would swing us back toward Earth? Of what use? Bartano's men would come down here after me. Perhaps I could hold out for a time—kill a few of them.

Or should I rush up to the deck? The hatches were barred. But suppose I could find one open? All futile—I'd be killed the moment I reached the deck.

**T**HEN from down the catwalk I heard voices—Venusians of the brigand crew—half a dozen of them—coming down to take possession of the mechanism room. Of what use to try and fight them?

I ran aft through the mechanism room. From the aft catwalk a metal ladder led downward to the base of the hull. There was a pressure-port exit down there, a little cubby with emergency apparatus.

What I might do flashed to me. It was a wild desperate plan but I could think of nothing else. I heard the tramp and the voices of the brigands in the mechanism room—the buzz of the audiphone as Bartano called down to them from the control turret. Like a cat I went down the little ladder.

The pressure-port was in the keel—a ten-foot cubical room with an upper sliding trap door. I dropped into it and slid the door closed over my head. Emergency pressure suits were here in racks on the wall. I seized one of the largest and donned it, strapped the chemical air-renewers around my waist, clamped on the helmet.

The suits were racked into small bundles. I took a second one under my arm—and in my gloved hand I held a cylinder of the emergency-



repulsion ray.

The pressure-port here had a sliding outer trap in the hull base. I did not stop to exhaust the air in the little room. I merely slid the trap open an inch or two. The air went out with a whining hiss. Then I slid the trap wide.

An amazing void lay at my feet, the black firmament of space, filled with blazing points of light. Sternward I could just see a limb of Earth—a gigantic crescent segment, stretching yellow-red across half the firmament.

For an instant I paused—and then I leaped. A weird sensation—it was like thrusting myself into water! The force of my leap sent me downward perhaps ten feet in a sluggish slackening fall, with my body slowly turning. Then the gravity of the bulk of the *Starlight Arrow* drew me back. I struck the hull and clung there with a tenuous hold as though I were a wafted feather.

Inch by inch I crawled up the hull-side. Up? There was neither up nor down! The hull was a convex surface under me—the black firmament and the stars were everywhere else. I came like a crawling fly to the glassite dome.

The dome was translucent, transparent only at the bullseyes, and I kept away from them. The deck, tilted sideward, was a blur beneath me. Then I was on the dome-top. The control turret merged with the dome. There was a tiny pressure-port cubby, big enough for one or two people at a time.

I reached the outer slide without raising the alarm. Through the tiny bullseyes I could see the cubical space under me now. The inner trap was closed. I opened the outer one. The cubby air came out. Then I dropped down and closed the slide over me.

The turret was directly under me now—a ten-foot windowed circular room. The trap beside which I was crouching was in its ceiling, leaving

a drop of fifteen feet down to the floor. There was no bullseye in this trap. I could see nothing but a blur through the translucent glassite.

Very cautiously I slid it the merest fraction of an inch. The turret air came hissing out to fill my tiny cubby. Would the hiss, or the upward air current, be noticed? I crouched tense, unarmed save for the steel hook welded into my glove.

Still no alarm. In a moment my cubby was filled with air. I doffed the helmet, shut off the suit mechanisms. At once I heard a voice from below—Bartano's voice, gloating.

"You look so frightened, little Earth-bird!" he said suavely.

"Those passengers!" Nona cried. "Are you going to keep on killing them?"

"Oh, no. I killed no one except when it was necessary. They will be marooned—but not you, little Nona. You are too valuable to me—a hostage, so that your government will recognize our Dark Country. We need Earth's help."

I slid the panel open a little wider. I could see the huge Bartano now, standing at the main control switches. And Nona across the room, backed against the wall, her eyes blazing, her face pallid, her golden hair a disheveled mass on her shoulders.

Then, abruptly, Bartano moved toward her. "Your beauty fascinates me, little Nona. I am master here. Master of everything—even you."

His huge arms went around her. She struggled, screamed—but his hand clapped over her mouth. In that second I dropped.

WHAT followed was a blur of chaotic horror. It may be that in the terror of his death the murderous Bartano had only the wild thought of taking everyone else into oblivion with him. Or it may have been an accident.

For myself I only know that as I

dropped I saw Bartano cast Nona away and lunge at me. I swung my arm. The pointed steel hook of my glove struck his neck, sank deep as I twisted and wrenched. Then it came free, bringing with it the flesh and the arteries of his throat—and a torrent of his blood.

He staggered but for an instant kept his feet. I stood staring, numbed by the grisly sight of him. And in that instant he lurched, half fell upon the main control table, deluging it with his blood, his arm in a wild flailing sweep scattering the fragile glass controls.

There was a flash—a hiss of short-circuited current. Then with the flashing speed of electricity, an explosion down on the deck where now the brigands were shouting in horrified amazement.

**A**NOTHER second and an explosion dim and muffled came from the hull. The doomed little *Starlight Arrow* burst outward.

I saw through the turret window that the dome over the bow-peak of the deck was buckling, cracking, arift with outward rushing air. Brief seconds of chaos—men screaming—the hiss and surge of escaping air mingled with their screams.

Bartano's body lay in a welter of gore on the wrecked controls with the blue aura of free electrons streaming from it.

I seized Nona. "Hurry! This ladder—"

I got the girl up it. The air was thinning. We gasped, choking amid the electrical fumes and the stench

of Bartano's burning body.

"Hurry—hold your breath, Nona! These fumes—"

I suppose within less than a minute I had her garbed and helmeted. I saw in those last seconds the whole bow-peak of the dome explode outward with a litter of human bodies and wreckage hurtled into space.

I flung open the cubby slide. The air blew us out—two bloated figures, clinging together. Gravity would have brought us back but I flung the stream of repulsive electrons from my hand-cylinder, turned them upon the wrecked vessel so that we were shoved away from it—slowly at first, and then with accelerating speed.

We clung together, bloated helmeted figures, almost weightless in the void. The great crescent limb of Earth seemed below us. The wreck of the *Starlight Arrow* was above our heads half a mile or more and rapidly receding.

Ghastly derelict of space—it lay broken, slowly turning, and around it myriad little satellites slowly revolved—fragments of wreckage and human bodies. Then presently the derelict was only a tiny gleaming speck of stardust. Then it was gone.

Earth's gravity was pulling us now. Soon we would be falling like meteors. But in the stratosphere the repulsion electrons of my hand cylinder checked us so that at last, through the atmosphere, we were wafted gently down . . .

Sole survivors of Earth-Venus, Voyage 12.

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**R**OD BLAKE looked up with a deep chuckle. The sky of Mars was almost black despite the small brilliant Sun and the brighter stars and planets that shone visibly. Earth, most brilliant of all, was scarcely sixty million miles away.

"They'll have a fine time chasing us back there, Ted." He nodded toward the brilliant planet.

Ted Penton smiled beatifically.

"They're probably investigating all our known haunts. It's their own fault if they can't find us—outlawing research on atomic power."

"They had some provocation, you must admit. Koelenberg should have been more careful. When a man takes off some three hundred square miles of territory spang in the center of Europe in an atomic explosion, you can't blame the rest of the world

By **JOHN W. CAMPBELL, Jr.**



*Penton and Blake find Mars an unexpectedly pleasant place to be—until they run afoul of the thushol, which can imitate anything!*

# The Brain-Stealers of Mars

for being a bit skittish about atomic power research."

"But they might have had the wit to see that anybody that did get the secret would not wait around for the Atomic Power Research Death Penalty—but would light out for parts and planets quite unknown and leave the mess in the hands of a lawyer till the fireworks quieted down. It was obvious that when we developed

atomic power we'd be the first men to reach Mars. Nobody could follow to bring us back unless they accepted the hated atomic power and used it," argued Blake.

"Wonder how old Jamison Montgomery Palborough made out with our claims," mused Penton. "He said he'd have it right in three months. This is the third month and the third planet. We'll let the government

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stew and sail on, fair friend, sail on. I still say that was a ruined city we saw as we landed."

"I think it was myself but I remember the way you did that kangaroo leap on your neck the first time you stepped out on the Moon. You certainly saw stars."

"We're professionals at walking under cockeyed gravities now. Moon—Venus—"

"Yes, but I'm still not risking my neck on the attitude of a strange planet *and* a strange race at the same time. We'll investigate the planet a bit first and yonder mudhole is the first stop. Come on."

They reached the top of one of the long rolling sand dunes and the country was spread out below them. It looked exactly as it had been from the last dune that they had struggled up. It was unendingly red—like an iron planet, badly neglected and rusted.

THE mudhole was directly beneath them, an expanse of red and brown slime, dotted here and there with clumps of dark red foliage.

"The stuff looks like Japanese maple," said Blake.

"Evidently doesn't use chlorophyll to get the sun's energy. Let's collect a few samples. You have your violet-gun and I have mine. I guess it's safe to split. There's a large group of things down on the left that look a little different. I'll take them while you go straight ahead."

"Gather any flowers, fruits, berries or seeds you see. Few leaves—oh, you know—what we got on Venus. General junk. If you find a small plant put on your gloves and yank it out. If you see a big one steer clear. Venus had some peculiarly unpleasant specimens."

Blake groaned. "You're telling me! I'm the bright boy that fell for that pretty fruit and climbed right up between the stems of a scissor tree. Uhuh—I shoot 'em down. Go ahead and good luck."

Penton swung off to the left while Blake slogged ahead to a group of weird-looking plants. They were dome-shaped things, three feet high, with a dozen long drooping sword-shaped leaves.

Cautiously Blake tossed a bit of stone into the center of one. It gave off a mournful drumming boom but the leaves didn't budge. He tried a rope on one leaf but the leaf neither stabbed, grabbed nor jerked away—as he had half expected after his lesson with the ferocious plants of Venus. Blake pulled a leaf off, then a few more. The plant acted quite plantlike, which surprised him pleasantly.

The whole region seemed seeded with a number of the things, nearly all about the same size. A few, sprinkled here and there, were in various stages of development, from a few protruding sword-leaves, to little three-inch domes on up to the fullgrown plants. Carefully avoiding the larger ones Rod plucked two small ones and thrust them into his specimen bag. Then he stood off and looked at one of the domes that squatted so dejectedly in the thick gummy mud.

"I suppose you have some reason for being like that but a good solid tree would put you all in the shade and collect all the sunlight going—which is little enough." He looked at them for some seconds picturing a stout Japanese maple in this outlandish red brown gum.

He shrugged and wandered on, seeking some other type of plant. There were few. Apparently this particular species throttled out other varieties very thoroughly. He wasn't very anxious anyway—he was much more interested in the ruined city they had seen from the ship. Ted Penton was cautious.

Eventually Blake followed his winding footsteps back toward the ship. About where his trail showed he had gathered his first samples he stopped. There was a Japanese

maple there. It stood some fifteen feet tall and the bark was beautifully regular in appearance. The leaves were nearly a quarter of an inch thick and arranged with a peculiar regularity as were the branches. But it was very definitely a Japanese maple.

Rod Blake's jaw put a severe strain on the hinges thereof. It dropped some three inches and Blake stared. He stared with steady blank gaze at that perfectly impossible Japanese maple. He gawked dumbly. Then his jaw snapped shut abruptly and he cursed.

The leaves were stirring gently and they were not a quarter of an inch thick. They were paper thin and delicately veined. Furthermore the tree was visibly taller and three new branches had started to sprout, irregularly now. They sprouted as he watched, growing not as twigs but as fully formed branches extending themselves gradually. As he stared harder at them they dwindled rapidly to longer twigs and grew normally.

Rod let out a loud yip and made tracks rapidly toward the point where he'd last seen Ted Penton. Penton's tracks curved off and Rod steamed down as fast as Mars' light gravity permitted, to pull up short as he rounded a corner of another sword-leaf dome clump. "Ted," he panted, "come over here. There's a—a—weird thing. A—it looks like a Japanese maple but it doesn't. Because when you look at it it changes."

Rod stopped and started back, beckoning Ted. Ted didn't move.

"I don't know what to say," he said quite clearly, panting and sounding excited, though it was a quite unexciting remark except for one thing. He said it in Rod Blake's voice!

Rod stiffened. Then he backed away hurriedly, stumbled over his feet and sat down heavily in the sand. "For the love of—Ted—Ted! Wh-what did you s-s-say?"

"I don't know wh-what to s-s-say."

Rod groaned. It started out exactly like his own voice, changed rapidly while it spoke and wound up as a fair imitation of Ted's. "Oh, Lord," he groaned, "I'm going back to the ship—in a hurry."

He started away, then looked back over his shoulder. Ted Penton was moving now, swaying on his feet peculiarly. Delicately he picked up his left foot, shook it gently like a man trying to separate himself from a piece of flypaper. Rod moved even more rapidly than he had before.

Long but rapidly shrinking roots dangled from the foot. Goopy mud dropped from them as they shrank into the foot. Rod turned again with the violet-gun in his hand. It thrummed to blasting atomic energy. A pencil beam of ravening ultra-violet fury shot out and a hazy ball of light surrounded it.

The figure of Ted Penton smoked suddenly and a hole the size of a golf ball drove abruptly through the center of the head, to the accompaniment of a harsh whine of steam and spurts of oily smoke. The figure did not fall. It slumped. It melted rapidly like a snowman in a furnace. The fingers ran together, the remainder of the face dropped, contracted and became horrible.

It was suddenly the face of a man whose pouted and dulled eyes had witnessed and enjoyed every evil the worlds knew, with weirdly glowing eyes that danced and flamed for a moment in screaming fury of deadly hate—and dissolved with the last dissolution of the writhing face.

AND the arms grew long, very long and much wider. Rod stood frozen while the very wide and rapidly widening arms beat up and down. The thing took off and flapped awkwardly away and for an instant the last trace of the hate-filled eyes glittered again in the sun.

Rod Blake sat down and laughed. He laughed and laughed again at the



very funny sight of the melting face on the bat-bodied thing that had flown away with a charred hole in the middle of its grapefruit-sized head. He laughed even louder when another Ted-Penton-thing came around the corner of the vegetable clump on the run. He aimed at the center of its head.

"Fly away!" he yelled as he pressed the little button down.

This one was cleverer. It ducked. "Rod—for the love of—Rod, shut up!" It spoke.

Rod stopped and considered slowly. This one talked with Ted Penton's voice. As it got up again he aimed more carefully and flashed again. He wanted it to fly away too. It ducked again, in another direction this time, and ran in rapidly. Rod got up hastily and fled. He fell suddenly as some fibrous thing lashed out from behind and wrapped itself unbreakably about his arms and body, binding him helplessly.

Penton looked down at him, panting. "What's the trouble, Rod? And why in blazes were you shooting your gun at me?"

Rod heard himself laugh again uncontrollably. The sight of Ted's worried face reminded him of the flying thing with the melted face—like an overheated wax figure. Penton reached out a deliberate hand and cracked him over the face, hard. In a moment Rod steadied and Penton removed the noose from his arms and body. Blake sighed with relief.

"Thank God, it's you, Ted!" he said. "Listen, I saw you—you—not thirty seconds ago. You stood over there and I spoke to you. You answered in my voice. I started away and your feet came up out of the ground with roots on them, like a plant's. I shot you through the forehead and you melted down like a wax doll to a bat-thing that sprouted wings and flew away."

"Uhh—" said Penton soothingly. "Funny, at that. Why were you looking for me?"

"Because there's a Japanese maple where I was that grew while my back was turned and changed its leaves while I looked at it."

"Oh, Lord!" said Penton unhappily, looking at Rod. Then, more soothingly, "I think we'd better look at it."

Rod led the way back on his tracks. When the maple should have been in sight it wasn't at all. When they reached the spot where Rod's tracks showed it should have been it wasn't there. There was only a somewhat wilted sword-bush. Rod stared blankly at it, then went over and felt it cautiously. It remained placidly squatted, a slightly bedraggled lump of vegetation.

"That's where it was," said Blake dully. "But it isn't there any more. I know it was there."

"It must have been an—er—mirage," decided Penton. "Let's get back to the ship. We've had enough walking practise."

Rod followed him, shaking his head. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he nearly fell over Penton when Ted stopped with a soft unhappy gurgling noise. Ted turned around and looked at Rod carefully. Then he looked ahead again.

"Which," he asked at length, "is you?"

Rod looked ahead of Penton over his shoulder. Another Rod was also standing in front of Penton. "My God," said Rod, "it's me this time!"

"I am, of course," said the one in front. It said it in Rod Blake's voice.

Ted looked at it, and finally shut his eyes. "I don't believe it. Not at all. *Wo bist du gewesen, mein Freund?*"

"*Was sagst du?*" said the one in front. "But why the *Deutsch?*"

Ted Penton sat down slowly and thoughtfully. Rod Blake stared at Rod Blake blankly, slightly indignant.

"Let me think," said Penton un-

happily. "There must be some way to tell. Rod goes away from me and then I come around the corner and find him laughing insanely. He takes a shot at me. It looks and talks like Rod—but he says crazy things.

"Then I go for a walk with him—or it—and meet another one that at least seems less insane than the first one. Well, well—I know German of course and so does Rod. Evidently this thing can read minds. Must be like a chameleon only more so."

"What do you mean?" asked Rod Blake. It doesn't particularly matter which one.

"A chameleon can assume any color it wants to at will. Lots of animals have learned to imitate other animals for safety but it takes them generations to do it. This thing apparently can assume any shape or color at will. A minute ago it decided the best form for the locality was a sword-bush. Some of these things must be real plants then.

"Rod thought of a maple tree, thought of the advantages of a maple tree, so it decided to try that, having read his mind. That was why it was wilted-looking—this isn't the right kind of country for maple trees. It lost water too fast. So it went back to the sword-bush.

"Now this one has decided to try being Rod Blake, clothes and all. But I haven't the foggiest notion which one is Rod Blake. It won't do a bit of good to try him on languages we know because he can read our minds. I know there must be some way. There must—there must—oh, yes. It's simple. Rod, just burn me a hole in that thing with your violet-gun."

Rod reached for his gun at once with a sigh of relief and triggered quickly. The phoney Rod melted hastily. About half of it got down into the boiling mud before Rod incinerated the rest with the intense ultra-violet flare of the pistol.

Rod sighed. "Thank the Lord it was me. I wasn't sure for awhile, myself."

Ted shook himself, put his head in his hands, and rocked slowly. "By the Nine Gods of the Nine Planets, what a world! Rod, for the love of heaven, stay with me hereafter—permanently. And whatever you do don't lose that pistol. They can't grow a real violet-gun but if they pick one up heaven help us. Let's get back to the ship and away from this damned place. I thought you were mad. My error. It's just the whole bloody planet that's mad."

"I was—for awhile. Let's move."

They moved. They moved hastily back across the sand dunes to the ship.

THEY'RE centaurs," gasped Blake. "Will you look at that one over there—a nice little calico. There's a beautiful little strawberry roan. What people! Wonder why the city is so dilapidated if the people are still here in some numbers. Set 'er down, will you, Ted? They haven't anything dangerous or they'd have a better city."

"Uhhmmmm—I suppose that's right. But I'd hate to have one of those fellows nudge me. They must weigh something noticeable, even here—about twelve hundred pounds back on Earth. I'm setting down in that square. You keep your hand on that ten-inch ion-gun while I step out."

The ship settled with a soft *thump* in the deep sandy dust of the ruined city square. Half a hundred of the centaurs were trotting leisurely up with a grizzled old Martian in the lead, his mane sparse and coarse. Ted Penton stepped out of the lock.

"*Pholsht*," the Martian said after a moment's inspection. He extended his hands out horizontally from his shoulders, palms upward and empty.

"Friends," said Ted, extending his



arms in a similar gesture, "I am Penton."

"Fasthun Loshthu," explained the centaur, indicating himself. "Pen-shun."

"He sounds like an ex-soldier," came Blake's voice softly. "Pension. Is he okay?"

"I think so. You can leave that post anyway. Shut off the main atomics, start auxiliary B and close the rooms. Lock the controls with the combination and come on out. Bring your ion-gun as well as your ultra-violet. Lock the doors."

"Blazes! I want to come out this afternoon. Oh, well . . ." Blake went to work hurriedly and efficiently. It was some thirty seconds before he was through in the power room. He stepped eagerly into the lock.

He stopped dead. Penton was on his back, moving feebly, the old centaur bent over him with his long, powerful fingers fixed around the man's throat. Penton's head was shaking slowly back and forth on the end of his neck in a loose rather-detached way.

Blake roared and charged out of the lock, his two powerful pistols hastily restored to his holsters. He charged out—and sailed neatly over the centaur's back, underestimating Mars' feeble grip. In an instant he was on his feet again and returning toward his friend when a skillful left forefoot caught his legs, and sent him tumbling. The heavy bulk of an agile young centaur landed on his back.

Blake turned—his was a smaller lighter body, far more powerfully muscled. In a moment the Earthman broke the centaur's grip and started through the six or seven others that surrounded him. A grunted word of command dissolved the melee and Blake stood up, leaping toward Penton.

Penton sat on the ground, rocking slowly back and forth, his head between his hands. "Oh, Lord, they

all do it here."

"Ted—are you all right?"

"Do I sound it?" Penton asked unhappily. "That old bird just opened up my skull and poured a new set of brains in. Hypnotic teaching—a complete university education in thirty seconds—all done with hypnotism and no mirrors used. They have the finest education system. Heaven preserve us from it."

"*Shthuntho ishthu thiu lomal?*" asked the old Martian pleasantly.

"*Ishthu psoth lonthul timul,*" groaned Penton. "The worst of it is it works. I know his language as well as I know English." Suddenly he managed a slight grin. He pointed to Blake and said, "Blake *omo phusthu ptsoth.*"

The old centaur's lined sparsely-bearded face smiled like a pleased child's. Blake looked at him uneasily.

"I don't like that fellow's expre—" He stopped, hypnotized. He walked toward the old Martian with blank eyes and the grace of an animated tailor's dummy. He lay down and the old Martian's long supple fingers circled his neck. Gently they massaged the back of his spine up to the base of his skull.

Penton smiled sourly from where he sat. "Oh, you don't like his face, eh? Wait and see how you like his system."

THE centaur straightened. Slowly Blake sat up. His head continued to nod and weave in a detached way until he reached up gingerly, felt around for it and took it firmly in his hands. He rested his elbows on his knees.

"We didn't both have to know his blasted language," he managed bitterly at last. "Languages always did give me headaches anyway."

Penton watched him unsympathetically. "I hate repeating things and you'll find it useful anyway."

"You are from the third planet," the Martian stated politely.

Penton looked at him in surprise, then rose to his feet gingerly.

"Get up slowly, Blake, I advise you for your own good." Then to the Martian, "Why, yes. But you knew! How?"

"My great-great grandfather told me of his trip to the third planet before he died. He was one of those that returned."

"Returned? You Martians have been to Earth?" gasped Blake.

"I guessed that," said Penton softly. "They're evidently the centaurs of legend. And I think they didn't go alone from this planet."

"Our people tried to establish a colony there many many years ago. It didn't succeed. They died of lung diseases faster than they could cross space. The main reason they went in the first place was to get away from the *thushol*.

"But the *thushol* simply imitated local Earth-animals and thrived. So the people came back. We built many ships, hoping that since we couldn't go the *thushol* would. But they didn't like Earth." He shook his head sorrowfully.

"The *thushol*. So *that's* what you call 'em." Blake sighed. "They must be a pest."

"They were then. They aren't much any more."

"Oh, they don't bother you anymore?" asked Penton.

"No," said the old centaur apathetically. "We're so used to them."

"How do you tell them from the thing they're imitating?" Penton asked grimly. "That's what I need to know."

"It used to bother us because we couldn't," Loshthu sighed. "But it doesn't anymore."

"I know—but how do you tell them apart? Do you do it by mind reading?"

"Oh, no. We don't try to tell them apart. That way they don't bother us any more."

PENTON looked at Loshthu thoughtfully for some time. Blake rose gingerly and joined Penton in his rapt contemplation of the grizzled Martian. "Uhmhhh," said Penton at last, "I suppose that is one way of looking at it. I should think it would make business rather difficult though. Also social relations, not knowing whether it was your wife or just a real good imitation."

"I know. We found it so for many years," Loshthu agreed. "That was why our people wanted to move to Earth. But later they found that three of the ship commanders were *thushol* so the people came back to Mars where they could live at least as easily as the *thushol*."

Penton mentally digested this for some moments while the half hundred centaurs about stood patiently.

"We have myths on Earth of centaurs—people like you—and of magic creatures who seemed one thing but when captured became snakes or tigers or other unpleasant beasts. If held long enough they reverted to human shape and would then grant a wish. Yes, the *thushol* are intelligent—they could have granted a simple Earth barbarian's wish."

Loshthu shook his head slowly. "They are not intelligent, I believe. Maybe they are. But they have perfect memories for detail. They would imitate one of our number, attend our schools and so learn all we knew. They never invented anything for themselves."

"What brought about the tremendous decline in your civilization? The *thushol*?"

The centaur nodded. "We forgot how to make space-ships and great cities. We hoped that would discourage the *thushol* so they would leave us. But they forgot too so it didn't help."

"Good Lord," Blake sighed, "how in the name of the Nine Planets do you live with a bunch like that?"



Loshthu looked at Blake slowly. "Ten," he said. "Ten planets. You can't see the tenth with any practicable instrument till you get out beyond Jupiter. Our people discovered it from Pluto."

BLAKE stared at him owlshly. "But how can you live with this gang? With a civilization like that—I should think you'd have found some means of destroying them."

"We did. We destroyed all the *thushol*. Some of the *thushol* helped us but we thought that they were our own people. It happened because a very wise but very foolish philosopher calculated how many *thushol* could live parasitically on our people. Naturally the *thushol* took his calculations to heart. Thirty-one percent of us are *thushol*."

Blake looked around with a swiftly unhappy eye. "You mean—some of these here are *thushol*?" he asked.

Loshthu nodded. "Always. They reproduced very slowly at first, in the form of an animal that was normally something like us and reproduced as did other animals. But then they learned to imitate the amoebae when they studied in our laboratories.

"Now they simply split. One big one will split into several small ones and each small one will eat one of the young of our people and take its place. So we never know which is which. It used to worry us." Loshthu shook his head slowly.

Blake's hair rose slightly away from his head, and his jaw dropped away. "My God!" he gasped. "Why didn't you do something?"

"If we kill one we suspect we might be wrong, which would kill our own child. If we don't and just believe it our own child anyway it at least gives us the comfort of believing it. And if the imitation is so perfect one can't tell the differ-

ence—what is the difference?"

Blake sat down again quietly. "Penton," he said at length, "those three months are up. Let's get back to Earth—fast."

Penton looked at him. "I wanted to a long time ago. But I just thought of something else. Sooner or later some other man is going to come here with atomic power and if he brings one of those *thushol* back to Earth with him accidentally, thinking it's his best friend—well, I'd rather kill my own child than live with one of those but I'd rather not do either.

"They can reproduce as fast as they can eat and if they eat like an amoeba—heaven help us. If you maroon one on a desert island it will turn into a fish and swim home. If you put it in jail it will turn into a snake and go down the drainpipe. If you dump it in the desert it will turn into a cactus and get along real nicely, thank you."

"Good God!"

"And they won't believe us, of course. I'm sure as blazes not going to take one back to prove it. I'll just have to get some kind of proof from this Loshthu."

"I hadn't thought of that. What can we get?"

"All I can think of is to see what they can let us have, then take all we can and make a return trip with reputable and widely believed zoologists and biologists to look into this thing. Evolution had produced some weird freaks but this is a freakier freak than has ever been conceived."

"I still don't really believe it," Blake said. "The only thing I am firmly convinced of is my headache."

"It's real enough and logical enough. Logical as hell—and hell on Earth if they ever get there. Evolution is always trying to produce an animal that can survive anywhere, conquer all enemies, the fittest of the surviving fit. All life is based on one thing—protoplasm.

"Basically it's the same in every creature, every living thing, plant or animal, amoeba or man. It is just modified slightly, hooked together in slightly different ways. The *thushol* are built of protoplasm—but infinitely more adaptable protoplasm. They can do something about it, make it take the form of a bone cell and be part of a thigh bone or be a nerve cell in a brain.

"From some of that ten-second-college-course Loshthu poured into us I gather that at first the *thushol* were good imitations outside—but if you cut into one, you could see that the organs weren't there. Now they have everything. They went through Martian medical colleges, of course, and know all about what makes a centaur tick. So they make themselves with the same kind of tickers. Oh, very nice."

"They don't know much about us. Maybe with the X-ray fluoroscope screen we could have recognized their imitations of us," suggested Blake.

"By no means. If we knew the right form they'd read it in our minds and have it. Adaptive protoplasm. Just think, you couldn't kill one in an African jungle because, when a lion came along, it would be a little lady lion. And when an elephant showed up it would be a helpless baby elephant.

"If a snake bit it I suppose the damned thing would turn into something immune to snake bites—a tree or something like that. I just wonder where it keeps the very excellent brain it evidently has."

"Well, let's find out what Loshthu can offer us by way of proof."

**I**T DEVELOPED that the Martians had once had museums. They still had them because nobody was sufficiently interested to disturb their age-long quiet. Martians lived for centuries and their memories were long. Only once or twice in a lifetime did a Martian enter a museum.

Penton and Blake spent hours in them, intensive hours under Loshthu's guidance. Loshthu had nothing but time and Penton and Blake didn't want to linger. They worked rapidly, collecting thin metal sheaves of documents, ancient mechanisms, a thousand other valuable things. They baled them with rope that they had brought from the ship when they moved it nearer the museum. Finally after hours of labor, bleary-eyed from want of sleep, they started back again to the ship.

They stepped out of the gloomy dusk of the museum into the sunlit entranceway. Immediately, from behind a dozen pillars, a leaping flashing group of men descended upon them, tore the books, the instruments, the data sheaves from their hands. They were upset, slugged, trampled on and spun around. There were shouts, cries and curses.

Then there was silence. Twelve Pentons and thirteen Blakes sat, lay or stood about on the stone stairway. Their clothes were torn, their faces and bodies bruised. There was even one black eye and another developing swiftly. But twelve Pentons otherwise looked exactly alike, each carrying a bit of data material. Thirteen Blakes were identical, each carrying a bit of factual mustiness under his arm or in his hand.

Loshthu looked at them and his lined old face broke into a pleased smile. "Ah," he said. "There are more of you. Perhaps some can stay with us to talk now."

Penton looked up at Loshthu, all the Pentons did. Penton was quite sure *he* was the Penton but he couldn't think of any way to prove it. It was fairly evident that the *thushol* had decided to try Earth again. He began to wonder just—

"Loshthu, just why," asked one of the Pentons in Penton's voice, "did the *thushol* not stay on Earth if they could live there?"

Penton was quite sure he was the one to think of that partic—



"Pardon me, but wasn't that the question I was going to ask?" said another Penton in fury.

"I can apparently be spared the trouble of doing my own talking. You all help so," said one of the numerous Pentons angrily.

"Say, how are we going to tell who's who?" demanded one of the Blakes abruptly.

"That damned mind-thief stole my question before I had a chance—"

"Why you — you — *you* should talk!"

"I think," said one of the Pentons wearily, "you might as well stop getting peeved, Blake, because they'll all act peeved when you do. Pipe down and I'll pipe down and we'll see what our good friend, Loshthu, has to say."

"Eh," sighed Loshthu. "You mean about the *thushol* leaving Earth? They did not like it. Earth is a poor planet and the people were barbarians. Evidently they are not so now. But the *thushol* do not like work and they found richer sustenance on Mars."

"I thought so," said a Penton. "They've decided that Earth is richer than Mars now and want a new host. Don't draw that pistol, Blake! Unfortunately, we had twenty-five ion-guns and twenty-five violet-guns made up. If we'd had more we would have more companions."

"We were exceedingly unfortunate in equipping ourselves so well in the matter of clothing and being so thoughtful as to plan all of it right, so that we carried a lot of each of the few kinds. However, I think we can improve things a little bit."

"I happen to remember that one ion-gun is out of commission and I had the coils out of two of the violet-guns to repair them. That makes three guns out of service. We will each stand up and fire, one at a time, at the sand in front there. The line forms on the right."

The line formed. "Now," con-

tinued that particular Penton, "we will each fire, beginning with myself, one at a time. First ion, then violet. When one of us evidences lack of a serviceable gun, the others will join in removing him rapidly but carefully. Are we ready? Yes?" That Penton held up his ion-gun and pushed the button.

It didn't fire, and immediately the portico stank with his smoke.

"That's one," said the next Penton. He raised his ion-gun and fired. Then his violet-gun. Then he raised it and fired again at a rapidly dissolving Blake. "That makes two. We have one more to eliminate. Next?"

Presently another Blake vanished. "Well, well," said Penton pleasantly, "the Blake-Penton odds are even. Any suggestions?"

"Yes," said Blake tensely. "I've been thinking of a patch I put in one suit that I ripped on Venus." Another Blake vanished under the mutual fire.

"There's one more thing I want to know. Why in blazes are those phonies so blasted willing to kill each other—and though they know which is which don't kill us? And how did they enter the ship?" Rod demanded.

"They," said two Pentons at once. Another one looked at them. "Bad timing, boys. Rodney, my son, we used a combination lock. These gentlemen are professional mind-readers. Does that explain their possession of the guns?"

"Now, since these little gun tests and others have been made, I think it fairly evident that we are not going to leave this planet until the two right men are chosen and only two go into that ship with us. Fortunately they can't go without us—because while they can read minds it takes more than knowledge to navigate a spaceship, at least such knowledge as they can get from us. It takes understanding, which memory will not supply. They need us."

"We will, therefore, march duti-

fully to the ship and each of us will replace his guns carefully in the prepared racks. *I* know that *I'm* the right Penton—but *you* don't. So no movement will be made without the agreement of all Pentons and Blakes."

Blake looked up, white-faced. "If this wasn't so world-shakingly serious it would be the damndest comic opera that ever happened. I'm afraid to give up my gun."

"If we all give them up I think it puts us even. We have some advantage in that they don't want to kill us. And if worst comes to worst we could take them to Earth, making damned sure that they didn't get away. On Earth we could have protoplasmic tests made that would tell the story. By the way, that suggests something. I think we can make tests here. Let's repair to the ship."

THE Blakes sat down and stayed down. "Ted, what in blazes can we do?" His voice was almost tearful. "You can't tell one of these ghastly things from another. You can't tell one from me. We can't—"

"Oh Lord," said another Blake. "That's not me. That's just another one of those damned mind-stealers."

Another one groaned hopelessly. "That wasn't me either." They all looked helplessly at the line of Pentons. "I don't even know who's my friend."

Penton nodded. All the Pentons nodded like a grotesquely solemn chorus preparing to recite some blessing. They smiled in superhuman unity. "That's all right," they said in perfect harmony. "Well, well. A new stunt. Now we all talk together. That makes things easier."

"I think there may be a way to tell the difference. But you must absolutely trust me, Blake. You must give up your guns, putting faith in my ability to detect the right one. If I'm wrong, realize that I will not know. We can try such simple

tests as alcohol, whiskey, to see if it makes them drunk, and pepper to see if it burns their tongues—"

"It won't work," said Blake.

Penton, all the Pentons smiled gently. "I'm half again as fast as you are, Blake, and no Martian-born imitation of you is going to be faster. Maybe these Martian imitations of me are as fast as I am. But you know perfectly well that I could ray the whole gang of you, all ten of you, out of existence before any one of you could move a finger. You know that, don't you, Rod?"

"Lord, yes. But, Ted, don't do that—don't make me give up my guns. Why should I give up mine if you keep yours?"

"That probably was not you speaking, Rod, but it doesn't matter. If it wasn't what you thought we could do something about it. Therefore, that is what you wanted to say, just as this is what I wanted to say, whether I said it or not."

"But anyway, the situation is this—one of us has to have unquestioned superiority over the other gang. Then the one with the whip hand can develop proof of identity and enforce his decisions. As it is, we can't."

"Let *me* be that one then," snapped one Blake.

"I didn't mean that," sighed another. "That wasn't me."

"Yes it was," said the first. "I spoke without thinking. Go ahead. But how are you going to make the others give up their guns? I'm willing. You can't make them."

"Oh yes I can. I have my faithful friends, here," said Penton grimly, his eleven hands waving to his eleven counterparts. "They agree with me this far, being quite utterly selfish."

"But what's your system? Before I put my neck in the noose I have to know that the noose isn't going to tighten on it."

"If I had a sound system in mind—I'm carefully refraining from developing one—they'd read it, weigh it and wouldn't agree at all. You



see that pepper and alcohol system won't work perfectly because they can read in my mind the proper reaction and be drunk or have an inflamed tongue at will, being perfect actors. I'm going to try just the same. Rod, if you ever trusted me, trust me now."

"All right, come on. We'll go to the ship and any of these things that doesn't part with its gun is *not* me. Ray it."

Blake rose jerkily, all ten of him, and went down to the ship.

The Pentons followed faithfully. Abruptly Penton rayed one Blake. His shoulder blades had humped curiously and swiftly. Wings were developing. "That helps," said Penton, holstering his guns.

The Blakes went on, white-faced. They put the weapons in the racks in the lock stoically. The Martians had seen the, to them, inconceivably swift movements of Penton's gun hands and Penton knew that he himself had done the raying that time.

But he still didn't know a way to prove it without causing a general melee which would bring about their own deaths. That wasn't so important. The trouble was that given fifty years the rest of the world would descend on this planet unwarned. Then all Earth would be destroyed. Not with flame and sword and horrible casualty lists—but silently and undetectably.

The Blakes came out, unarmed. They shuffled and moved about uneasily, tensely, under the watchful eyes of eleven Pentons armed with terrifically deadly weapons.

Several Pentons went into the ship, to come out bearing pepper, saccharine tablets, alcohol, the medicine chest. One of them gathered them together and looked them over. "We'll try pepper," he said rather unhappily. "Line up!"

The Blakes lined up, hesitantly. "I'm putting my life in your hands, Ted," said two of them in identical

plaintive tones.

Four Pentons laughed shortly. "I knew it. Line up. First, stick out the tongue."

With unsteady hands he put a bit of pepper from the shaker on the fellow's tongue. The tongue snapped in instantly, the Blake clapped his hands to his mouth, gurgling. "Waaaar!" he gasped. "Waar—achooo—damnt!"

WITH hands like flashing light Penton pulled his own and a neighbor's ion-gun. In a fiftieth of a second all but the single gagging choking coughing Blake were stinking, smoking, swiftly dissolving and flowing rubbish. The other Pentons methodically helped destroy them.

Blake stopped gagging in surprise. "My God, it might not have been the right one!" he gasped.

The ten Pentons sighed softly. "That finally proves it. Thank heaven. Definitely. That leaves me to find. And it won't work again because while you can't read my mind to find the trick that told me these brothers of mine have. The very fact that you don't know how I knew proves that I was right."

Blake stared at him dumbly. "I was the first one—"

"Exactly. Go on inside. Do something intelligent. Use your head. See what you can think of to locate me. You have to use your head in some such way that they don't mind-read it first though. Go ahead."

Blake went, slow-footed. The first thing he did was to close the lock-door, so that he was safely alone in the ship. Blake went into the control room, donned an air-suit complete with helmet and pushed a control handle over, then a second.

Presently he heard curious bumpings and thumpings and strange floppings and whimperings. He went back rapidly and rayed a supply chest and two crates of Venusian specimens that had sprouted legs and were rapidly growing arms to

grasp ray pistols. The air in the ship began to look thick and greenish. It was colder.

Contentedly Blake watched and opened all the room doors. Another slithering thumping noise attracted him and with careful violet-gun work he removed an unnoticed extra pipe that was crawling from the crossbrace hangers. It broke up into lengths that rolled about unpleasantly. Rod rayed them till the smallest only, the size of golf balls with curious blue-veined legs, staggered about uncertainly. Finally even they stopped wriggling.

Half an hour Rod waited while the air grew greener and thicker. Finally to make sure he started some other apparatus and watched the thermometer go down until moisture grew on the walls and became frost and no more changes took place. Then he went around with an opened ion-gun with a needle beam and poked everything visible with it.

The suction fans cleared out the chlorine-fouled atmosphere in two minutes and Blake sat down wearily. He flipped over the microphone switch and spoke into the little disc. "I've got my hand on the main ion-gun control. Penton, I love you like a brother but I love Earth more.

"If you can induce your boy friends to drop their guns in a neat pile and retire—okay. If not, and I mean if not within thirty seconds, this ion-gun is going into action and there won't be any more Pentons. Now, drop!"

Grinning broadly with evident satisfaction ten Pentons deposited twenty heart-cores of ultra-essence of destruction and moved off. "Way off," said Blake grimly. They moved.

Blake collected twenty guns. Then he went back into the ship. There was a fine laboratory at one end and with grim satisfaction he took down three cotton-stoppered tubes, being very careful to handle them with rubber gloves. "You never did man a good turn before, tetanus,

but I hope you spread high, wide and handsome here—"

He dumped them into a beaker of water and took beaker and glass down to the lock and out. The ten waited at a distance.

"All right, Penton. I happen to know you took a shot of tetanus anti-vaccine some while ago and are immune. Let's see if those blasted brain-stealers can steal the secret of something we know how to make but don't know anything about. They can gain safety by turning into chickens, which are immune, but not by remaining as human creatures. That's a concentrated dose of tetanus. Go drink it. We can wait ten days if we have to."

The Pentons marched boldly up to the beaker, resting beside the ship. One stepped forward to the glass—and nine kept right on stepping. They stepped into the lee of the ship where the ion-gun could not reach.

Blake helped Penton into the ship with a broad grin. "Am I right?"

"You're right," sighed Penton, "but—you can't get tetanus by swallowing it and lockjaw doesn't develop in ten days."

"I didn't know for sure." Blake grinned. "They were too busy trying to find out what I was doing to follow your mind. Ah—*there* they go. Will you ray them or shall I?" asked Blake politely.

"There's one thing—ahhh"—he straightened as the incredible glare died in thin air—"I want to know. How in blazes did you pick *me* out?"

"To do what you did requires some five hundred different sets of muscles in a beautifully coordinated neuromuscular hookup, which I didn't believe those things could imitate without a complete dissection. I took the chance it was you."

"Five hundred sets of muscles! What the heck did I do?"

"You sneezed."

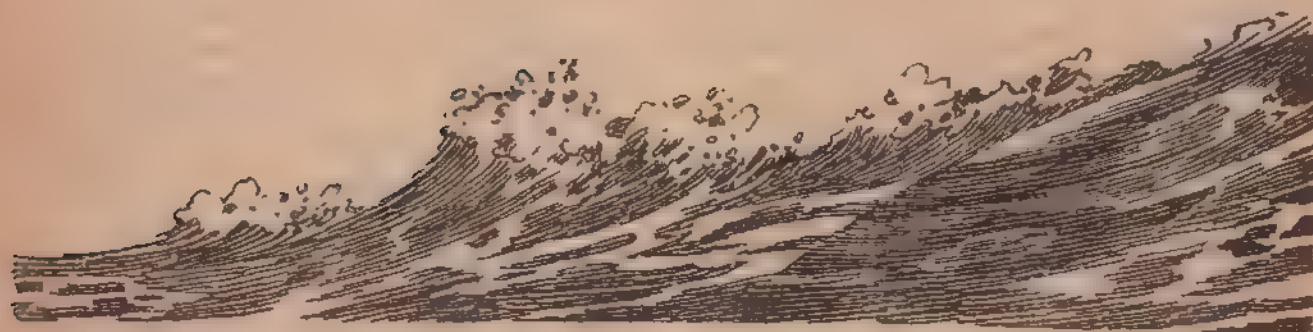
Rod Blake blinked slowly and slowly his jaw tested again its supports and their flexibility. ● ● ●



# The Invincible MIDGE

*Thrice in time humanity is called upon to meet  
a menace which threatens it with annihilation,  
and three times individuals prove prepared for  
self sacrifice in order that mankind may live!*

**By PAUL ERNST**



**T**HE sentinels of the tree-people crouched in the highest branches of their communal dwelling place and stared fearfully toward the west.

Beneath them the activities of the tree village were stilled. Men, women and children crouched on quivering haunches, each near a tree

bole up which quick ascent could be made if necessary. The strings of tough vines, crudely fastened from tree to tree, which made a sort of rough platform thirty feet above the teeming ground, were empty. The hairy mighty-thewed folk crouched and stared as the sentinels in the treetops above them—toward the



west. There, where the white-hot sun was dying, was the danger source. From there came death—death on two colossal hind legs, towering as high as a tree itself.

When the hairy tree-people built their aerial village thirty feet above the death-infested ground, they had hoped to know a new safety. For

a while they had. The saber-toothed tiger, the monstrous serpent, the great bear, were baffled by that height. They could be beaten off by stone axe and club before they reached it.

But this new menace, which threatened the very race, made a mockery of their sanctuary.



In the highest branch of the conifer tree in the center of the aerial village crouched Taljuck the Quick. Near him was the gorilla-like form of Ank, strongest man of the tribe.

Ank's thick lips moved and guttural chattering sounds were articulated through his heavy protruding jaws. It was not language—it was rather a series of symbolic sounds painting simple pictures of the mind.

"You think the Great One will come on this sun-death?"

Taljuck grunted. His jaws were not quite so bestial as those of the other hairy folk. His forehead was a little higher, his eyes a little clearer. His enormous hairy hands tightened on the odd contrivance he had made during the last four days.

"Who can say? Sometimes the Great One comes, sometimes it does not. But when it does come it is always at this hour."

Ank's muddy brutish eyes went to the queer invention in Taljuck's hands.

"You are going to try that on the Great One?"

"Yes—if it comes." Taljuck looked at the new weapon born of his brain. Fierce pride was in his eyes.

**I**T WAS a tough curved length of wood nearly four inches through. From end to end of this was a tiger tendon, scraped as thick as his little finger. A long straight stick with a sharp stone was tied to one end.

Taljuck placed the blunt end of the stick on the tendon, stretched the heavier stick in a great arc, then relaxed it. The bow and arrow had been born of Taljuck's brain, though its birth was not to be credited for thousands of centuries. Through it Taljuck's tribe was to reign supreme for the lives of ten thousand succeeding generations.

"This cannot kill so great a beast at once. But it can pass through

the throat and later the thing will die."

"You can send that stick through the Great One's throat?" echoed Ank.

Taljuck fingered the pointed stone at the end of the crude arrow. Eons later men were to find that and think it a peculiarly shaped axe-head, not realizing the enormous muscles of the men that could use it as an arrowhead.

"It will pierce the throat. I know what it can do."

A scream arose from below. It came from the downy lips of a young girl—Sor the Farseeing.

"It comes! It comes! I see the Great One's head!"

The tree-people rushed here and there, chattering like great apes. One child fell—its hairy mother swung monkeylike to the ground, caught up her offspring, clambered to the heights again.

To the heights—that did not protect against so huge a thing as the Great One!

The sentinels, biggest and strongest men of the tree-folk, grunted excitedly to one another. All but Taljuck—Taljuck was silent, bracing himself in the tree-fork with hairy legs while his great hands flexed and loosed the bow and arrow, first of Man's great inventions.

In the semicircle made by the white sun sinking over the horizon a head appeared. It was a reptilian head, colossal, its gaping jaws studded with huge teeth. A short vast throat appeared, then the rest of the body.

The body was a mountain of lizard-flesh and bone carried on two inconceivably enormous legs, with a great tail to help its blundering balance. It hitched over the ground, crushing young trees, making the steamy earth tremble. And as it neared the tree village it reared higher so that its incredible head was above the level of the hairy people's sanctuary.

The Great One, they called it. Long, long afterward it was to be named, from its remains, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the most ferocious animal ever known. This was an anachronism, perhaps the last of its kind on Earth, a freak survivor of a species supposed to have died out millions of years before the appearance of the hairy folk.

But the tree-people did not know that. All they knew was that suddenly, moons ago, this enormous thing had appeared over the skyline at sunset, stalked to their village and taken five of their number as a tall man might pluck five green gourds from a high tree and gulp them down. Since then the Great One had come at irregular intervals and always four to seven of their number went down that tremendous maw.

Bowing to the Great One and worshipping it, giving it sacrifices voluntarily, had not placated it. The tribe was in danger of extinction—unless Taljuck's two sticks could somehow save it.

To the highest branches scuttled the tree folk, there to cling like furred fruit. But the highest branches were not high enough. The trees, mighty of girth, were not lofty. A roaring *whoosh* of air was expelled from the Great One's throat and its basilisk eyes fastened on Sor the Farseeing.

**S**CREAM after scream ripped from her lips. Her face, just becoming downy with the fine hair of adolescence, was the color of a lizard's belly. The other tree folk chattered and moaned. Taljuck bent the great bow.

The Great One's jaws gaped as it lumbered toward the tree in which Sor clung, paralyzed. Vine catwalks were swept away like thread by the monster's bulk. There was a last shriek, a dry clashing of teeth—

"Taljuck! *Strike!*" Ank grunted in anguish.

In the hands of Taljuck the Quick, the big bow quivered at its full arc. But the Great One was yards from his perch. He did not yet dare send the long stick with the sharp stone on it singing forth as he had learned to do in the days before.

The tyrannosaurus, as though drawn by Taljuck's appalled but steady eyes, turned toward his tree. It lumbered there. Ank chattered and shrieked in the tree beside him.

"*Strike, Taljuck! Strike!*"

But still, with steady eyes, Taljuck held the arrow taut on the tiger tendon. The Great One crashed to within ten yards.

Shrilling his despair, Ank loosed his hold and fell plummetlike to earth, risking death by the fall rather than face the monster longer. He moaned and grunted on the ground, both legs broken so the bone protruded through the hairy flesh—which meant a lingering instead of a quick death.

Taljuck, with a grunt, released his stone-tipped stick.

With a thin shriek the arrow cleaved the air. The sharp stone hit the leather-armored throat of the Great One and went on through. The arrow, driven by a force unknown to the muscular framework of man today, buried itself almost to its blunt end in the lizard's flesh.

The monster stopped its rush. Its short front legs went up and its claws raked at the thing that stuck out like a splinter from its streaming neck. Then, with an ear-splitting scream of air from its cavernous body, it came on—toward Taljuck.

Taljuck clung to his tree-fork, as paralyzed as Sor had been. The Great One was not at all harmed by the arrow, it seemed. Dimly its low-ordered nervous system informed its tiny brain that it had been hurt—but its vast strength was unimpaired.

It got to Taljuck's tree, lunged



against it, reached for the hairy human midge with gaping jaws. Taljuck the Quick stared at the gaping maw which was streaming gouts of red from the transfixing arrow. The great bow dropped from his nerveless hands.

From other high points the tree-folk screamed and chattered and moaned. The branch to which Taljuck had clung was empty. It quivered still with the force of clutching hands that had been torn from it—and that was all.

Taljuck the Quick, first inventor, was pulp in the tooth-studded mouth. But what was this?

The Great One, though only two bodies had gone into its cavern-mouth, was not crashing after more. It stood motionless beside the tree in which Taljuck had clung. Its expressionless eyes looked toward the west, not toward extra victims.

A thundering bubbling air-rush came from its transfixed throat. Blood and hairy fragments that it could not swallow geysered from its maw. It lurched slowly away from the aerial village.

For a long moment the hairy people watched it go, unable to understand. Then the first timid shout of deliverance keened out, to grow to a chattering, grunting chorus.

The Great One was being driven away! Taljuck's stone-tipped stick had beaten it!

Three days later the tribe feasted on the mound of flesh that lay off toward the west. Ordinarily no death of a man was remembered for three days, individually, in the dim minds of these folk. But they remembered Taljuck's, because he had saved the tribe! They feasted in Taljuck's name and the men of the village fashioned long sticks to bend, like his, and send stone-tipped lances into the flesh of other animals.

Taljuck the Quick was dead—but the tribe lived on, saved by the living fruit of his brain.

FROM their mountain observatories all over the world the astronomers peered up the magnifying channels of their three-hundred and three-hundred-and-fifty-inch telescopes.

In the teeming cities around them activities were stilled. Men, women and children stood hushed in the streets and they stared as the astronomers did, up into the sky. For every man's fearful eye, and every man's appalled thoughts, in the year 2114, were on the same object.

The Moon!

From that heavenly ball, hanging balloonlike now in the cloudless sky, it seemed that the death of the human race was coming. For the Moon was dying—and in its extinction it promised to upheave Earth so that no tiny human mite—perhaps no life at all—would be left on its surface.

The human race had thought itself in a position to live a tranquil and untroubled existence on Earth forever. It had outlawed the horrible wars that had decimated civilization several centuries ago. It had solved the food problem, producing sustenance for Earth's billions with only a few hours of work a day for each individual. It had prolonged the span of life to an average of a hundred and ten years.

Man was firmly enthroned, he had thought. And for a time this had been true.

But now this cataclysmic menace from the heavens threatened the entire human race!

In the Mount Everest observatory Professor Talmadge turned from the eyepiece of the telescope, which was so powerful that it would have revealed a man walking on the moon's surface, had there been one there to walk. He stared at his assistant, Tohiki.

"It's the end," he said. "The Moon is falling toward Earth at a rapidly accelerating rate."

Tohiki nodded, dark slanting eyes

shining with sad intelligence. "Even if it fell no further," he said, "it would be the eventual end."

Both were silent, thinking of the catastrophes that had begun at once with the Moon's inexplicable subsidence back toward the planet from which it had been torn a million years ago.

All over the world earthquakes of unbelievable violence had destroyed cities, drained great lakes, created new ones, changing Earth's map at the incidental cost of millions of lives.

All over the world volcanic eruptions had burst forth on a terrifying scale. Active volcanoes had belched more molten rock in a year than in all their recorded history.

Old volcanoes came alive again. New ones formed in the most unlikely places. One, its jagged new crater ten miles across, spouted through ancient rock in the Alleghanies, obliterating all human life as far north as New York and as far south as Washington.

But the worst of the disasters were the floods—ever-increasing in height and severity.

With each high tide the water of the seven seas rolled to new levels, pulled by the increasing drag of the Moon. Daily tidal waves mounted, their roaring crests loftier than they had been the day before.

**N**O COASTAL cities of any nation were in existence any longer. A few twisted metal stubs showed where tall buildings had been. A few weed-wracked lines of broken stone indicated streets—when they could be seen at all under low-tide depths. All human beings, save those millions that had been engulfed by the encroaching sea, had long since fled to the inland mountains.

"And still the Moon comes closer," murmured the Japanese.

"Still it comes closer." Talmadge nodded. "And it will continue to

approach. It will reach the point where the ocean tides rage over the whole face of the Earth daily. They will submerge all land, even this great crest.

"Nothing but marine life will endure. In fact, even that may perish, for at this point the Moon will probably burst and surround Earth with a belt of a million tiny moons that will blanket us from the Sun so that our planet freezes."

Tohiki's intelligent eyes went to a small drawing hung on the observatory wall. "That may save us," he said.

Talmadge shrugged. "There is perhaps one chance in ten that a choice few of Earth's people may survive the coming disasters in the Talmadge Retreat. If anything can save us, that can."

The astronomer, who was that rare scholar, a man of general accomplishments in varied fields of science, walked to the drawing and studied it with proud yet critical eyes.

Read in scale the drawing showed a cavern ten miles across, with a rounded roof a quarter of a mile high, supported by rows of enormous metal pillars. The cavern was in the base of a mountain, indicated by dotted lines. Their outline was that of Everest itself, showing that the depicted cavern lay beneath the feet of the two men.

"Shall we call the elected few tonight?" said Tohiki.

Talmadge bit his lips. His eyes, farseeing and keen, narrowed. Then he nodded.

"Yes, tonight. We know what is to happen shortly. There is no reason for delay. And Tohiki—only two thousand people, the best of every walk of life."

"I understand," said Tohiki. Death was in his eyes as it was in the eyes of Talmadge. But the coming cataclysm was too great for anything but utter desperate calmness. "Particularly you want engineers who



can handle the atom-disrupter."

"Yes, by all means," replied Talmadge.

Tohiki left the observation chamber. Talmadge went over in his mind for the thousandth time the one thing that made barely possible the preservation of human life on Earth.

The Talmadge Retreat? No, it was not that. Anyone could excavate a great cave at a mountain's base. It was another matter to feed and clothe two thousand people in it, to give them air to breathe over centuries of time. This Talmadge hoped to do with his atom-disrupter.

It was the last great invention of mankind—one which by its very simplicity had baffled science for centuries.

All matter is similar in that it is made from the same building blocks. One substance is different from another only in that its atoms have varying numbers of protons and electrons. It had been known for a long time that if atoms could be disintegrated to their component parts and the parts rearranged, any desired element could be produced from the elemental debris. Furthermore, any substance could be contrived synthetically by controlled molecular arrangement.

Starkly ferociously simple, this fact! And with stark ferocious simplicity Talmadge had solved the equation.

He disrupted atoms with heat.

But such heat! Three million degrees Centigrade, produced for a few millionths of a second by electrical discharge through high-tension vacuum tubes! It could not be kept up longer for fear of burning out the apparatus. But those few millionths of a second were enough to strip atoms.

THE re-addition of electrons to produce any given element? That had been more difficult. But Talmadge had solved it in experiments

no less sublime for being empirical. He had discovered that different degrees of heat produced different elements, had the differences tabulated. Thus by a variation of a few hundred thousand degrees he could take stripped atoms and give you what you liked from hydrogen to uranium.

From then on it was a mere matter of synthesis to produce anything from air for breathing to food for eating—out of rock, metallic ores or anything else at hand. There were slight variations between the synthetic and the real products. Talmadge's oxygen, for example, had an atomic weight of 16.0003 instead of 16.0001. But these differences had no practical flaws.

Thus, with the so-called atom-disrupter, Talmadge proposed to keep two thousand human beings existing for indefinite centuries in a cave under the base of Everest—until such time as the planet returned to something like normality after the Moon's disruption, once more allowing life on its surface.

Talmadge sighed. He thought his mighty invention was perfected. If it were the human race had a slight chance of survival. If it were not...

Soberly he looked around the observatory for the last time, absently patted the magnesium rim of the tremendous telescope reflector plate. Then he went out into the sparkling cold air of Everest's crest, and stepped onto the slow-speed strip of the endless escalator which, in its high-speed outer edge, took him toward the mountain's base at forty miles per hour.

Within ten hours all were assembled in the great cavern in the bowels of the mountain. There were men and women of the highest standing in all branches of science. There were men and women picked because of eugenic factors to maintain the physical stamina of the race. There were a few old men, chosen for their extensive learning

—but in the main it was a young crowd. Talmadge knew well how necessary for blind race survival was a sound physique.

The cave, in which these people were to live and their descendants after them for unimaginable centuries, was ready.

In its center rose a domed building that was the heart of the place. Down from that went a shaft half-way to the core of the Earth. Up this shaft came Earth's internal heat to be transmuted into plentiful power.

Around the shaft-head were the banks of atom-disrupters, where all necessities of life were to be manufactured. Tinned food enough for thirty years was in stock, only after consumption of which would the two thousand have to begin existing on synthetic food pellets.

The entrance into the cavern was a mile-long tunnel from outer air at the base of Everest. This had been blocked up against the future mighty tides by a solid seal of liquescent rock which hardened into a substance like gneiss.

Through the center of the mile-long seal, however, had been left a one-inch hole. Down this were lenses in sequence, terminating in a fish-eye lens that spread vision. A simple peephole, arranged because the atmospheric disturbances caused by the Moon's approach made television impossible.

Talmadge addressed the shivering throng in the cavern. "Friends—Earth, as you know, is about to pass into an epoch more violent than any it has suffered since it cooled enough for life to begin. During this violence we and our descendants hope to exist in here, through flood and fire, through the Moon's bursting and blanketing of Earth, through the ensuing glacial period.

"Mankind's nucleus may struggle up to a reborn world from this cave a thousand years from now, a million—perhaps never. But mean-

while we shall keep the spark of the race alive, I hope."

That was all, and even that was superfluous. All knew why they were here and what faced them. The calm of catastrophe beyond mortal imagination to visualize held them.

Talmadge turned to the peephole.

IT WAS all very bewildering and incredible. There was no explanation for the suddenness with which it happened. All scientists had agreed that the mounting tides would rise gradually, a little higher each day, until at last all Earth would be daily deluged. And all scientists were wrong.

Talmadge, inventor of the atom-disrupter, turned to that peephole to see for one thunderous instant a thing which was impossible—but which was nevertheless occurring.

Instead of increasing in height gradually the Moon-dragged tide had leaped within a few hours to within a half mile of what should be its eventual maximum!

He had thought to see a dry vista from the mountain's base—had thought it would be weeks before the high plateau would feel its first ripples from the distant ocean. Instead Talmadge looked through the rock seal to see something that at first he thought was a great mountain chain newly formed, about a quarter of a mile from the fish-eye lens.

Then he saw that the mountain chain was composed of water, was the first really great tidal wave.

A sort of moan left his lips. Mile high, in spite of the altitude to which it had already climbed to reach here, the wall of water rushed toward Everest. Talmadge's stunned eye saw great crests toppling from its highest ridge, to be absorbed by the wall before they could cascade downward, so great was that wall's speed. He saw something like a tiny slug for an instant near the crest, realized it was a whale.



He saw white specks on the ground, microscopic in comparison with the tidal wave, swallowed in a half second and realized that the lofty buildings of the new city of Ebberhow, on Everest's base, had been destroyed as all things pertaining to humanity must have been destroyed along the total wave's path.

A wave a mile high! Coming with incalculable speed and force! Talmadge saw the solid wall rush seemingly upon his own defenseless person as it raced for the far lens, then saw nothing at all as the water struck the mountain's base.

"*Friends!*" he cried, turning from the peephole. "The cataclysm is upon us. The first great wave has struck!"

His voice was lost in the trembling and rumbling of the mountain as all of mighty Everest quivered to the shock of that tremendous wall of water. But the people heard—and Tohiki, with a despairing scream, sprang to Talmadge's side.

He was not quick enough.

Talmadge ordinarily would have seen his danger as quickly as the agile-witted Tohiki. He knew enough of hydraulics to realize the incompressibility of water. But the magnitude of what he had seen stunned his brain—and Tohiki was not quick enough.

At one instant Talmadge stood with the back of his head next to the peephole—and at the next Talmadge's head had disappeared. His body sank to the floor while over it, from the peephole, roared a one-inch stream of steam and water as straight and solid as a metal bar.

The lenses, pushed before the water column like glass bullets, crashed to atoms against the opposite cavern wall ten miles way. The water column endured for five hundred yards before it feathered to nothingness. It grew in diameter to an inch and a half, to two inches, to three, before the wave outside passed on and left a glistening

drenched world to rear bared rocks to the air again.

Then the two thousand in Talmadge's Retreat, their horrible panic allayed, went to the body of their leader.

Talmadge's head had been sheared off almost as though with a knife as the lenses shrieked from the peephole. The flesh of his throat at the stub-end was pulped almost to the consistency of whipped cream by the high velocity of the projectiles.

A concerted moan came from the throng in the cave. Then shoulders were straightened with grim resolve and faces were turned resolutely toward one another.

Outside lay a drowned and lifeless world—one that would be so battered and drowned daily for thousands of years. Inside their leader, Talmadge, lay dead.

But the protecting seal of his liquescent rock and the beneficent products of his atom-disrupter lived on after him. The human race had a chance at salvation because of the work of his clear mind.

AS IT was late afternoon Talgor the Tall, huddled into the protection of his vacuum-suit and stared through the transparency of his oxygen helmet at the familiar landscape spreading from the vacuum-walled tower beneath him.

He looked absently at a world as round and smooth as a gigantic billiard ball—a world covered by thin top-soil on which grew patiently nothing but lichenous moss—a world lit dimly by a dark-red sun.

Time was, according to the ancient fables, when the Sun had been virile and warm and bright. Men did not have to walk abroad in vacuum-suits to keep from freezing in the everlasting cold. Many forms of vegetation and of animal life had flourished. There had been mountains and valleys, lakes and rivers and oceans.

Then, according to the dim legends, a great satellite whose name was lost in antiquity had fallen on Earth. It had raised tides that raged for uncounted centuries. The tides had smoothed down mountains and filled up depressions. The satellite had broken up, shielding Earth from the sun and water had frozen into a solid and uniform shell over the world's smooth face.

The countless fragments whirling around Earth had gradually been pounded to dust by meteors, finally had vanished, leaving the world again to bask in the sun's rays. But it was a dying sun now, with little left of its original heat.

But before the Great Change legend had it that a handful of men and women had hidden from chaos in the bowels of Earth under a lofty mountain. They had literally eaten rock, tearing down the atoms of whatever material was around them and remaking them into life's necessities. The handful had grown to hundreds of thousands and the small cave into which they had originally gone had become a vast underground kingdom.

Then they had emerged to the world as it now was—to find that they were not the sole form of life still existing! Another form had evolved across the world from their mountain, a form so alien and foreign, so horrible—

**T**ALGOR looked guilty around and then, hastily, pressed the little switch which shielded his thoughts from the Masters. Almost since the memory of present men there had been, in the transparent oxygen helmets they were forced to wear in Earth's thin atmosphere, the familiar transmitter sending thought vibrations to the headpiece receivers of the Masters.

It was only a year ago that Talgor had devised the sensitizor screen which shielded his thoughts from the transmitter. Now he could keep his thoughts secret when they dwelt on Them, though he was aware that death would be his lot if They found it out.

[Turn page]

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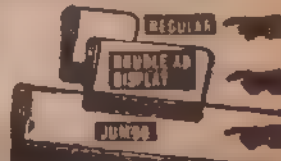
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He went on with his bleak thoughts.

During the chaos caused by the fall of Earth's now-forgotten satellite Man had survived in his cave. Across the world cold-blooded life, which man called fish, had also survived. Most submarine life had been killed by the battering tidal waves, just as air-breathing creatures had been killed. But a few had found refuge in an underground ocean.

NO ONE could guess how many million years ago that had been. No one could theorize about the evolutionary course that gradually followed. All that could be said was that when Man came forth from his underground empire the descendants of these cold-blooded marine beings similarly emerged.

They were still cold-blooded, able to freeze and thaw out again without harm. They still breathed oxygen from water. Their transparent helmets contained water instead of air. But they walked on four paddlelike legs, clothed their glistening hairless bodies in vacuum-suits.

And in their never-blinking, lidless eyes shone intelligence—much intelligence!

They were bigger than Man in brain as well as in bulk. Man had stagnated underground. He had kept alive the atomic knowledge compiled by the nameless hero whose inventive genius had saved the remnants of the race—but had added no new knowledge.

The cold-blooded water-breathing creatures had kept expanding in brain power.

They became the Masters, with human beings as their slaves.

Talgor smiled bitterly. Men were little enough use to the Masters! They were far ahead of men in thinking capacity—their hardy physical points made them better fitted to survive in Earth's present bleakness. Talgor had often thought that the Masters allowed mankind to exist only because of Man's hands.

Marvelous things, hands! With them men and women, the slaves, could build machines more easily than could the Masters with their flippers. They could more easily manufacture the water the Masters needed for their breathing—for long ago all water lying normally on Earth's surface had evaporated.

But, regardless of their purpose, the Masters kept mankind in a bondage none the less horrible for the fact that the great majority of human beings were not versed in the ancient legends and did not know the comparative servitude they were in.

But Talgor knew! He knew that men had once ruled Earth. He knew that men should be superior to these cold and emotionless beings calling themselves Masters.

And he plotted for the return of Man's day!

HE STIRRED in his vacuum-suit and stared over the tower's rim. Below he saw several dozen small figures moving. They were friends, secretly appointed to meet him here. He went down the tower's core to the rendezvous.

A score of figures moved to join him as he emerged at the tower's base. They were white—colorless in a way inconceivable to mankind of a far earlier day. Their hair was white, their skins were white, their eyes were white save for pale smudges of pupils. Absolutely without color. Talgor the Tall towered among them. He was nearly four feet in height, almost as big as the average Master.

"You have your thought-screens switched on?" he said swiftly and without preamble.

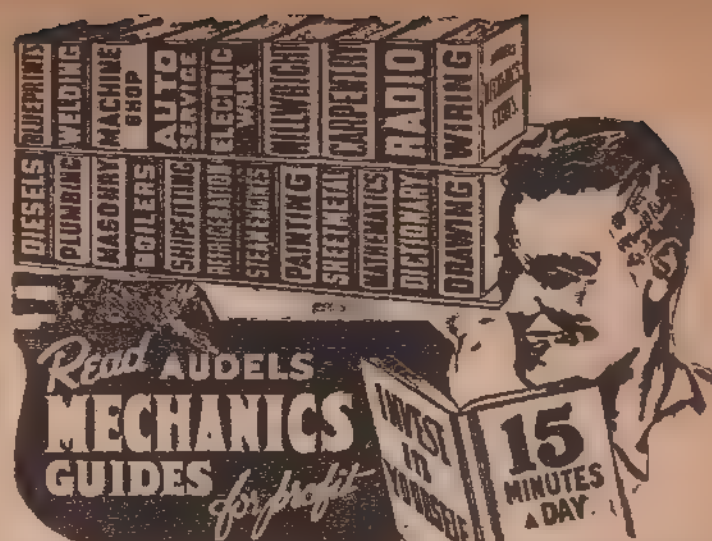
All nodded soberly. They were moving on the edge of death, meeting here, conspiring against the Masters, and all knew it poignantly.

"You are ready to risk your lives to the end that the world be cleared of the Masters, that human beings shall be supreme again?"

Their white heads inclined a second time.

"You know to the full the bondage

[Turn page]



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in which you are held?"

"I know," said one, his voice sounding broken and hoarse through the diaphragm in his helmet. "My woman was taken last year for thinking against the Masters. They took her helmet and vacuum-suit from her and watched while she strangled and froze."

"I know," said another. "A short time ago the Masters took my first child. I had allowed the third bank of atom-rearrangers, under my care, to slow for a needed repair and they sought to punish me."

"They threw her, a little girl, into the rearrangers. I saw her disappear before my eyes. Then They turned the heat-control to nine hundred thousand degrees and a ragged blob of codium appeared where my first child had been."

THE others somberly added their tales of horror and oppression. The last concluded on a desperate note—one which Talgor, however, had sensed before.

"The Masters are about to get rid of us, I believe," this man said. "Time and again one or more of us have gone mad and revolted. Some of the Masters have been killed. Some of their machinery has been smashed. They have had several councils in which men are called unstable and a possible menace. They are holding one now. I believe it will be their last council!"

Talgor the Tall, nodded, with desperate calm.

"I believe you speak the truth. I believe the race of man is lost unless a weapon I have been working on for nearly a year can save it."

"That is?" inquired the oldest among the rest.

"You shall see."

TALGOR led the way into the entrance through the thick vacuum walls of the tower. It was an ordinary supply tower, one of the smaller and more remote of the hundred towers which were the scattered heart of all life—in which were all the latest and finest of atomic machines.

They were substantially the same as the one which had gone with the handful of human beings into the cavern far in the dim past when the Earth's satellite fell and broke.

The unknown hero of that time had come close to the ultimate with his atom-disrupter.

It was possible to make few improvements.

Power was still obtained by borings toward Earth's core—borings that pierced to the very center now. The nearest available substance was thrown into the disrupters, to emerge after varied heat treatments as the various materials of life, just as had been done in the cavern.

Talgor the Tall led the way to the boring in this particular tower. Beside the two-foot-thick nozzle of pure ardrium, hardest of all known alloys, was a squat bell of transparent substance, within which could be seen numberless tubes topped by a circular grid of some metal none of the men had ever seen before.

"This is the weapon with which I hope to save mankind," said Talgor, his eyes sternly proud as he stared at the bell. "Within this bell heat from the boring is converted to electrical energy, which is in turn transformed back to radiant heat and stepped up in wave-length almost to infinity by the tubes.

"The radiant heat is capable of passing through atmosphere and other transparent substances, of expending its energy on whatever opaque body stops it—up to a range of about ten miles. There its force is dissipated, diminished by the square of the distance traveled. But I think that the range will be sufficient."

The others stared at him, awed, frightened, hopeful.

"But the Masters' vacuum-suits," objected one, at last. "They may be capable of insulating their bodies against even your radiant heat."

Talgor smiled bleakly.

"Their bodies may be shielded to some extent but not their heads. For they wear transparent helmets just as we do and my radiant heat will

[Turn page]

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pass through transparencies as it does through the atmosphere itself, diminished only by the square of the distance."

"You are sure—" began one of the rest, timidly.

"I am sure of nothing," said Talgor. "I have had no time to experiment properly. The Masters moved too quickly for that. My weapon may kill them—or it may not. That is the chance we take. Now you must go quickly. The Masters will be here soon."

"The Masters? *Here?*"

"Yes. For the past few minutes I have had my thought-screen switched off so that they could read my mind and learn of the plot against them here. I concealed only the manner of the weapon itself. Within a few moments the Masters will be here—all of them save the very young and the infirm, darting to crush me before I can menace their race."

**T**HE other men milled around the tower with frightened cries. For generations fear of the Masters had been inbred in them.

The knowledge that, in a body. They were coming here now maddened them with fear.

"Leave the tower at once," Talgor's calm voice stated. "Prepare to kill all survivors of the Masters' race as soon as I have struck. Prepare to lead mankind back to freedom."

The men streamed all too willingly toward the entrance. But one said, "You, Talgor! What happens to you?"

"Leave the tower instantly before it is too late!" Talgor interrupted with a break in his voice.

**W**HAT would happen to him? He knew only too well what would be his fate—what must be the fate of any man within these walls when his radiant-heat transmitter began to function.

The others ran from the tower. From the soles of their metal boots appeared their gravity plates, shielding mass from Earth's gravitational



pull. They shot heavenward, soared on stubby wings that slithered from the arms of their vacuum-suits, rose skyward again when altitude was lost in distance, repeated the process, sky-hopping rapidly off to the east. And from the west—

The face of Talgor the Tall paled under his helmet.

The sky to the west seemed to be darkening with a great cloud. But there had been no such thing as a cloud in the sky for a million years. This blackening was caused by the massed bodies of the Masters—each of them capable of movement was rushing to Talgor's tower because of the fragmentary thought-threat he had permitted them to receive. A menace to their race! This one mad human midge must be crushed—then, in more leisurely fashion, the rest of the slave race that had lately grown annoying!

Talgor watched from the entrance. The up-and-down advance of the Masters, like waves of a great black sea, rushed toward him. They towered up in a last ascent before swooping. He could see individual bodies now—monstrous cylindrical bodies with four stubby limbs—heads with staring, lidless eyes glaring out through water-filled helmets. He leaped to the control of his heat transmitter. His thin white fingers clutched it.

One touch of that ardrum lever and, if his calculations were correct, the human race was saved! It was as tremendously, as sublimely simple as that.

But he himself—

The thin air outside the tower whistled and shrieked with the cleaving of thousands of stubby wings. Talgor the Tall pulled the control.

FOR weeks, along the equatorial belt where life was concentrated, human beings under the leadership of the score who had been the last to talk with Talgor destroyed remaining vestiges of the monstrous race that had enslaved Man for thousands of years.

The old and the very young—those

[Turn page]



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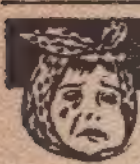
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who had been too distant to get to Talgor's tower with the main body—all the Masters Talgor had not annihilated. Then, with mankind once more enthroned on Earth, they erected a great statue to Talgor which they placed where the tower had once been.

Had once been!

There was scant trace of the structure now!

When Talgor pulled the control the vacuum walls had blazed and melted, allowing the radiant heat to smite full against the wheeling towering horde of Masters. The heat had charred their heads, then exploded their helmets as the water within was turned to steam. Only blackened fragments strewn the burned earth for miles around—all that was left of the last grave threat against humanity's existence.

Talgor?

Well, there was no tower left, no trace of its banked machines. There was nothing left where the tower had stood save a distorted transparent bell within which was fused metal.

Talgor had given his life when he pulled that control.

Talgor was dead. But the human race lived on.

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